

Shining Star

Pedro Alberto Vera

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To all of you, my deepest and most sincere thanks!

Pedro Alberto Vera

Foreword

Sometimes you don't know if you can do something until you try it. Sometime in September 2003 I decided to stop procrastinating with my writing and I pushed myself to expand on a story line that had been bothering me for the best part of the year. A week before I intended to complete the book, I learned about the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) competition, which is run throughout November every year. Immediately I signed up, wrapped up writing of my book and prepared to write *Shining Star*, which is based on a general idea I have thought probably since I was in high school.

NaNoWriMo proved to be a life-changing experience for me. I finished the basic draft in a little over three weeks! Writing was easy; the problem was later with the editing and revisions. It took me until April 2004 to put the manuscript in a shape that more or less left me satisfied.

And then I did not do a thing about it for over two months.

I realized that I needed to get the book out, and publishing it (yet) was not acceptable. If I waited another year for it to be shopped around for publishers, and then for it to go through the publishing process, I would lose all interest in the follow up stories that pick up where this one will stop.

That is when I realized I could release it as a download for personal use only. That way people can read my book and I can move on and work in the next version. If there is enough interest in a printed copy of the book, then I would be more than happy to make arrangements to have it published. The Creative Commons License under which this work is released allows you unlimited personal use and redistribution as long as I receive credit for my work, it is not used for commercial purposes and it is not used for derivative works.

I really hope you can enjoy my book! Please send your thoughts and comments to pedro@veraperez.com and visit my web site at <http://veraperez.com>

Prologue

Puerto Rico, or *Borikén*, as its indigenous tribes used to call it, was “discovered” by Christopher Columbus on his second trip to the Americas, on November 19, 1493. Over the next 512 years the island saw an unending series of colonial governments, and there was always an excuse to avoid granting the island complete self-rule.

The first to rule where of course the Spaniards. They ruled the island until the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Next came the Americans, who little-by-little lessened their grip on the island until in 1952 the island became a Commonwealth of the United States. This gave the island an autonomous government but not complete independence. Over the years various political groups within the island tried to force a vote to move the government from the quasi-colonial commonwealth to either full independence or full statehood as part of the United States. None succeeded.

The basic problem was that major political factions in the island were hopelessly deadlocked. At least 80% of the voting population of the island voted along strict party lines, which were evenly split between statehood with the US and to remain a commonwealth. The remaining 20% were split between pro-independence groups and people that selected candidates based on specific issues.

Puerto Ricans were already US citizens due to the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917. Under the commonwealth Puerto Ricans cannot vote in the US Presidential elections, and do not pay federal income taxes unless they work for the federal government. They pay social security and Medicare taxes and males are required to register in the Selective Service upon their 18th birthday. The island receives military protection from the US, and all federal agencies have a presence there. The official languages are English and

Spanish.

All these services cost money, which was acceptable to the US since Puerto Rico had been the strategic gate to the Caribbean basin since the Spanish landed. Until something drastic happened, like if for example Castro dropped dead and the communists are toppled, Puerto Rico would remain an important defense concern for the Americans.

This all changed with the fall of communism.

Suddenly the Americans found themselves without strategic enemies, and the big drawdown of armed forces started. Puerto Rico got hit hard and eventually lost all military bases, except for the navy base at Roosevelt Roads and Fort Buchanan, a small garrison in the San Juan metropolitan area. The Navy also kept a naval gunnery range in Vieques Island, off the eastern coast. The locals protested the gunnery practice for years, but the Navy did not pay attention until a civilian security guard got killed in a training accident.

The public outcry was loud enough so eventually the gunnery range was closed. The Americans, in retaliation, closed down Roosevelt Roads, the largest single employer in the east coast of the island.

Chapter 1

The White House

Washington, DC.

After suffering the worst defeat in the history of the country for a sitting president, the President of the United States smiled to himself: he had a backup plan.

Hours before his concession speech he held a meeting with only his Chief of Staff plus the secretaries of State, Defense and Commerce. The meeting was held to wrap-up a project known only to the five attendees, something they have worked on and off over the last year and a half.

Of course, there would be no record of the meeting. Since the project started they had worked with a very simple rule: no paperwork. Everything had to be digital until the very end. Not that it really mattered now, since they did lose the elections. By the time anyone figured out what was going on the damage would be done.

Once the finishing touches were in place (and everyone was happy), an aide was summoned to the West Wing offices to deliver a series of documents to the US Congress. These documents were the core of what would forever be known as the Puerto Rican Status Resolution Act, or PRSRA.

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico had been a thorn in the side of the president for his whole term of office. He felt that it cost the nation money that was much needed elsewhere, and except for some US Army Reserve units and having use of the island for strategic purposes, it was by all means useless to him, and by extension, to the country.

Puerto Rico had been a US territory since the Treaty of Paris of 1898, at the end of the Spanish-American War. The island was still a possession but its political status was blurry. Puerto Rico was a “commonwealth”¹ of the United States but whenever the US turned the other way, the local politicians would start playing nation state games. For example, the governor of the island was known to try stupid bullshit like signing economic treaties with neighboring countries, sending delegations, etc. If he let the Puerto Rican governor do that, next thing he knew the governor of West Virginia would be out there trying to sign treaties with Costa Rica or some other place.

The president felt that the idea of the commonwealth was stupid. He realized that the commonwealth meant giving to the island a hell of a lot more than what he took out of it. Sure, he got to draft them since they were forced to register in the Selective Service, and sure, they paid social security and Medicare, but they still cost a pretty penny. They did not file federal tax returns yet still benefited from the services of all the agencies of the federal government.

A week later both houses passed the PRSRA. The president signed it the very next day, but the press elected to ignore it since they were still busy rubbing on his face his defeat in the elections.

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Rosa Isabel Meléndez, governor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, did not hear about the PRSRA through official channels. Instead she found out by reading *El Nuevo Día*, a very influential newspaper that was controlled by the PNP², the pro-statehood party. Governor Meléndez was a Popular, that is, she belonged to the PPD³, the part that supported a continued commonwealth.

Governor Meléndez repressed the urge to scream at the top of her lungs. Not only had she learned that the Americans had finally figured out the means to ditch the island, but she had to read the news from an opposition newspaper. Of course, she could not scream. After all, she was the governor. If she lost her temper then her staff would assume she had lost control.

“Mariela,” she said calling her staff secretary, “would you please ask the Divine Trinity to walk in here for a quick meeting?”

¹The Puerto Ricans call it the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State)

²*Partido Nuevo Progresista*, or New Progressive Party. Backers of the PNP are called *Penepés*.

³*Partido Popular Democrático*, or Popular Democratic Party. Backers of the PPD are called *Populares*.

“Yes Madam Governor.”

Less than 30 seconds later, her three top advisers, Carlos Hernandez, Anibal Gomez and Rafael Cordero, all lawyers, all three political science professors at the University of Puerto Rico, walked into her office.

The press called them the “Divine Trinity.”

That was too quick. The three little shits knew already and were waiting to be summoned.

“Madam Governor, you asked to see us?” Cordero asked.

“This is not going to take long. Effective immediately I have accepted your resignations. I will announce this in a press conference about 30 minutes from now.”

The three men were thunderstruck.

They still don’t get it, the stupid morons!

“Madam Governor, May I inquire what is the reason of our resignation?” Hernandez asked.

“It was either that or put you on trial for dereliction of duty. Should I elaborate?” She replied.

It was obvious that she did not expect or desire an answer. The three men quickly scurried away to clean their desks before she changed her mind.

The governor then had her secretary call first her husband, a well-known banker, and then her lawyer, who also happened to teach constitutional law at the School of Law of the University of Puerto Rico. It was half an hour before both men arrived, which gave her time to get her act together and at least try to show she was in full control of her emotions.

When the two men arrived she simply threw copies of the paper at both of them. When the two men arrived she simply threw copies of the paper at both of them. It was clear that both had read the paper already and had elected to postpone this meeting for as long as possible.

Am I the last one to hear about this? What is wrong with these people?

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, the madam governor could not hold any longer:

“Explain to me did a split US Senate, with a split House, with a DEFEATED president managed to get their goddamned acts together long enough to completely wreck a solid, 50-something year old political institution.” She demanded.

“Honey,” her husband started, “maybe it is not so bad.”

“Don’t honey me goddammit! Did you read El Nuevo Día? There is a FINAL plebiscite. Final as in this is the last goddamn time it is going to

happen. And did you notice the funny part? WE ARE NOT PART OF IT!"

"What do you mean with that? Of course we are part of it," her lawyer replied.

The governor started losing her patience but realized it was not their fault that they could not grasp what was really at stake.

"The people of Puerto Rico are going to be asked, for the last time, what the hell they want to do. They can join the US and become the 51st state. Or they can declare independence. There is no provision for a commonwealth, and no, write-ins are not allowed."

"Rosa, I don't think this is legal." Her husband said.

"Of course it is legal! They probably spent a year working on that bill and making sure it did not have any loopholes in it!" She snarled back.

"I am going to have to race back to the office and try to research on this, but my first impression is the sons of bitches got their act together on purpose to ditch us." Her lawyer conceded. "They know there is no way in hell that the people of the island are going to vote for statehood."

Puerto Rican political alignments mimicked the two party system in the states. In the US, around 80% of the voting population votes along party lines, so the elections are decided by the remaining 20%. Whenever a political candidate is campaigning, he is trying to help sway the members of the 20% group, since he knows his party voters will stick with him regardless. The political split in the commonwealth works more or less the same.

About 80% of the voters are evenly split between the PPD (pro commonwealth) and PNP (pro statehood). The remaining 20% or so is mostly comprised of voters that will place their vote based on other factors than on just party lines. The 40% that would usually vote for the PNP would vote for statehood by default, no doubt about it. The problem was that the 40% that usually voted PPD (which was left out of the elections since there would be no choice to continue the commonwealth) would vote for Independence out of spite. The remaining 20% had a strong pro-independence element, so in reality the independence option would win with very little campaigning.

Her lawyer knew this, just like every other armchair politician in the island. It did not take a genius to figure out that this move was a planned effort by the Americans to kick Puerto Rico out from their protective umbrella.

"Most of the people from our party will vote pro-independence," her lawyer conceded.

"OK, you go and try to figure out what the hell to do. I got to face the senate myself to explain why the hell we did not catch this before it was

signed.” She said.

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It took six long miserable months of political grandstanding, U.S. Supreme Court appeals and downright begging, but the special elections were upheld. The governor resigned herself to the idea that the commonwealth as a political idea was dead.

20 years from now I will be in the history books as the idiot that stood idle while the islanders voted to get out of the union, which eventually meant the end of Puerto Rico as a geographical entity. We will end up as a banana republic.

The special election would be conducted on the first Tuesday of April.

Chapter 2

The other two political parties took to the news like it was an early Christmas. The PNP, being pro-statehood, went into overdrive with a scare campaign that tried to make the people see that independence would turn the island overnight into a second Cuba.

It was corny but effective.

The PNP political strategists were not worried about their core membership. Like political parties in the continental US, Puerto Rico has a great majority of people that vote along party lines, not by candidate. Because of this there was not much danger of a big segment of their party members voting for independence. It would be unheard of.

The PIP (pro-Independence) folks had a bigger task at hand, but they had an advantage: they had been preparing for this moment for more than 60 years. As new blood was infused into the party, new arrivals got conditioned to the kind of nasty political storm that would surge if and when the island was faced with a final choice between statehood and independence.

There was more. The Independentistas had William Roth.

Roth was an interesting character: a self made millionaire, born and educated in the island, and then military service in the US. William was a man of many connections, and his allegiance was with the island.

William was also behind the PRSRA. It was he that wrote the original position paper outlining how expensive the island was and how it was a losing proposition to keep pumping money into it. While his paper was pretty straightforward he still had to do some (anonymous) political maneuvering, and in a couple instances it came down to downright bribery and intimidation. Which was fine with him, he had enough money to burn.

Ten years earlier William Roth had realized that the island would never progress unless it had a real government, and the commonwealth was not going to cut it anymore. What the island needed was statehood.

The problem was that the US could not afford a 51st state. William cringed at the thought of the island trying to survive on its own, but it was either that or to watch the commonwealth fall apart over the next 15 years.

It all came down to funding. He needed to find something to make the island self-sufficient. At the same time, he had to hide this from the US or they would never agree to let the island bail out.

William spent the previous eight years funding secret research into natural resources available to the island. Offshore oil was the obvious choice, but it would cost a bundle to do the research. Still, a plan was hatched and put into action.

Right as PRSRA was being debated in the West Wing of the White House, William had found absolute proof of at least three separate submarine oil deposits that would yield a yearly output compared to more than half the total oil used by the states. If he could exploit the find, he could sell the oil to the Americans much cheaper since the transportation distance was a fraction of what it would be to move oil from the Persian Gulf.

Now that the economics of the situation were reasonably under control, Roth had to start looking into the political elements. Roth would have to find a way to make sure the PNP could not tamper with the elections, and he had to get himself nominated as a presidential candidate for the first presidential elections in the history of the island.

Chapter 3

The Capitol

San Juan, Republic of Puerto Rico

President Elect William Roth told himself that when there is a will, there is a way. Three long arduous months of campaigning, bribing and strong-arming paid off. And better: the plebiscite had been a clean win for the independence choice.

Within hours of the close of the polls for the plebiscite, which were conducted with automated equipment donated by the good people of Palm Beach, Florida, the President of the US had phoned the president of the Independence Party both to congratulate him in this historic moment and to announce to him that a resolution would be announced at the United Nations on the very next day. Its purpose was to request international observation for the first presidential elections in the history of the island, which would be held on the first Tuesday of November.

The president of the Independence Party was thrilled. This was the first time since Columbus landed in 1493 that the natives of the island would be truly allowed to govern themselves. When the call was over, he turned to his visitor.

“William, are you sure this is going to work?”

“We got nothing to lose at this stage, do we?” he replied.

That was months in the past. William Roth had just defeated four other candidates to win the presidency, plus he had 63% of the votes.

International observation was a big plus. The world press commended

the United States in their democratic gesture by allowing the island to become the country it was entitled to be. One enterprising newsman tried to get a reaction on the streets of Washington, DC, from disgruntled residents that (he did not know) were sore that after so many years the district was still under the taxation without representation regime. All he got for his efforts was a mob that chased him throughout Lafayette Square, right in front of the White House. The police did not intervene until somebody landed an empty bottle of rum on his head. Before he fainted he noticed the rum was distilled and bottled in Puerto Rico.

President William Roth spent his first week in office making speeches and receiving representatives from almost every country in the Caribbean basin plus some Europeans and South Americans. Those were the ceremonial meetings; the business meetings would start over the weekend.

Right as the Secretary of State of the Dominican Republic was leaving his office, one of his aides stuck his head into his office:

“Boss, turn on Telemundo!” one of Roth’s aides said. Telemundo, WKAQ, was the most popular TV station in the island.

“What the hell happened?” He usually had CNN on and muted. President Roth walked to his desk and picked his remote to switch the channel and turn on the volume.

“We are here at the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport with the former governor of Puerto Rico. Madame Governor, what is going on?” A reporter for Telemundo asked.

“I am leaving the island. I want no part in whatever mess that man Roth has in mind for the island. If I was you I would consider how long is going to take before he starts attacking the civil liberties that allow you to be a reporter.” She said bitterly as she walked into the security checkpoint, still manned by the American Transportation Security Agency.

President Roth turned off the TV.

“That scene is going to be repeated many times throughout the month. They are grandstanding, that’s all. They want to go into the books as political exiles. Well, fuck them.”

The aide, realizing he was way over his head, decided to nod and leave the president alone.

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Back in the states, a political circus was starting to unravel. There were leaks to the press hinting at foul play around the confirmation of the PRSRA. The former president waved it off as pure speculation, but the polarity of the

house had changed during the elections, and a special commission was setup to investigate the events leading to the approval of the PRSRA.

This of course, was pro forma. The leaks came from President Roth. Roth believed a little political turmoil to distract the Americans would buy him some time while he put his game pieces into place.

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While the international media was going wild hog over the PRSRA fiasco, President Roth got sworn-in. After a long and elaborate speech he declared a 7-day long national holiday. His detractors, backed by the former PNP, started a series of political ads comparing the week-long holiday to a return of the Spanish policy of the 3 B's: *Baile, Botella y Baraja*¹.

Roth did not waste his time and started unleashing ten years worth of skeletons buried in everybody's closets. In the first salvo he netted half the leadership of the PNP plus some annoying people from the PPD. After major exposure to the media, he arranged deals with each of them so they could leave the island nation, with one catch: they had to sign an agreement to not return to the island for fifteen years.

Everybody took the deal.

The PRSRA did not strip Puerto Ricans from their US citizenship, so anyone was still free to reside in the states. The new citizenship laws only applied to non-American immigrants and to newborn children.

With half their leadership gone for good, the rest of the PNP politicians scrambled for cover. Some arranged backroom deals to switch to Roth's party, the Progress Party (his naming the party this way was a slap in the face to the PNP followers, since PNP stood for "New Progressive Party"). Most of the PPD followers had voted for independence, so they were fairly happy with the situation.

President Roth did not want to give the country the week off, but he desperately needed everybody distracted during the first crucial week. It was pure luck that the PNP politicians attacked: the scandalous aftermath would be the first of many nails into their coffins. With his biggest political obstacle out of the way, he turned his attention to the economics of the island.

When Puerto Rico wakes up next Monday the island will be fiscally cut-off from the states, thought the first President of the Republic of Puerto Rico.

¹Dance, Drink and Gamble, the three things that the colonial Spanish Regime fomented to keep the populace happy and distracted from paying attention to what the politicians were doing.

Chapter 4

The White House

Washington, DC.

The new president of the United States, Marcus Wheeler, felt uneasy about the Puerto Rican affair. He was cynical enough to understand that even if there had been tampering with the democratic process when the PRSRA was enacted, there was also a bigger picture, and it did not make sense.

Why would all these disparate politicians stick together on an issue like this?

He quietly thanked God for his idea to get rid of the whole cabinet when he came aboard. If and when the issue blew up, all the major players involved would be out of government service.

The President called his Secretaries of State and Defense for a special task: he wanted the intelligence community to put together a position paper on major strategic concerns that could benefit from the dissolution of the commonwealth in Puerto Rico.

SecDef was quick to react:

“Mister President, if I may. There is a basic strategic issue here, and the Secretary of State will probably agree with me. That island should have never left the protection of the US. It is the gateway to the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico. With the proper armament they could challenge any ship trying to reach the Gulf or Caribbean shores.”

“Is that so, SecState?”

“Yes sir, the Secretary is correct. That is why we never made any noise

to leave the island. Yes, it is expensive as hell, but in strategic terms it is a bargain.”

“What about Guantánamo Bay?” the president asked.

“Gitmo is not enough. We need Puerto Rico.” SecState answered.

“How can they afford to buy any armament? The country is running a worse deficit than California!” SecTreas added.

“The boys at CIA say there have been an increase of oil surveying activity on the northern coast of the island,” SecDef said.

“How come nobody told me about it?” The president asked, half a second before both SecTreas and SecState tried to ask the same question.

“With the funding crunch the CIA has to pick between assigning resources to keep an eye on China and the Middle East. There is no time to keep an eye on something like that.”

The president did not reply; he was well aware of the financial aspects of running intelligence operations, after all he was a retired National Intelligence Officer.

“This is what I want: Have your people put together the position paper. You have 30 days to pull it off.”

The men, realizing they had just been dismissed, stood up and single-filed out of the office.

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With 3 days to go before the national holiday was over, President Roth had received excellent news: the German company in charge of surveying for the oil had called with an incredible offer: Give us 5% of the gross revenues of the whole offshore drilling operation and we will finance the infrastructure.

The First President of Puerto Rico made his first un-presidential display of behavior: he jumped off his chair and started screaming for his cabinet members to race to his office (their offices were on the same floor of the new Executive Building, across the street from the White House in San Juan).

The President started by stating (not threatening) that anyone that talked to unauthorized persons about the meeting would find him or herself with a one-way ticket to Miami and 15-year exile papers (the term was starting to turn popular). Once he had everybody’s attention, he started his pitch.

It took him the best part of the hour to spell out his economic stimulus package. As the meeting progressed some of his more savvy cabinet members found small holes in the plan; these were noted for and would be taken care of before the plan was to be put into effect.

After the hour everybody around the table stood up and applauded. They finally agreed on a course of action that would launch Puerto Rico as an economic powerhouse that would lead the rest of the region.

Chapter 5

Washington, DC

Official Washington was not too happy about the new Republic of Puerto Rico: the intelligence community was having a hard time coming up with leads on what really happened. Not that it would have helped: the Puerto Ricans had opened an embassy in Washington and had hired the services of the biggest political lobby shop in the city. The press, always tipped mysteriously, was never more than one step behind, and did not hesitate to plaster their headlines with the failures of the new administration to deal with the “Puerto Rican Issue,” as it was now being called.

The Puerto Rican public relations machine was impressive: Full-page ads in all the major papers exhorting the delights of Puerto Rican tourism were running almost daily. Also, international observers were invited to visit the first oil drilling operations off the north coast of the island nation.

Then President Roth dropped the bomb.

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The President of the Republic of Puerto Rico issued a press release:

Thanks to the incredible finding of the oil deposits, and the deal under which Siemens would finance the whole operation out of their pockets in exchange for a percentage of the gross, Puerto Rico had become officially self-sufficient. The drilling would start immediately; since Siemens would use prefabricated floating platforms while the permanent platforms are being built.

This cash influx helped in many ways, but there was more. President Roth announced there would be no income taxes for individuals that have

had filed a return in the previous five years. The exclusion would last 15 years and had a provision to be renewed at that time.

This move was mostly psychological. Many people in the island cheated on their taxes, but most at least filed them. Later in the year a Social Security Act would be enacted and the US Government had already agreed (after some magnificent arm twisting) to transfer all monies paid by Puerto Rico residents so these could be transferred into the new Social Security Service.

While the island nation was still trying to catch her collective breath over the announcements of the oil deal, the tax cuts and the transfer of Social Security, President Roth struck again: a revised version of the old Section 936 was enacted.

The old Section 936 allowed corporations to operate in the island without paying taxes. It meant thousands of jobs with great salaries. Operating in the island allowed the companies to produce cheaper and not having to worry about import tariffs, since back then Puerto Rico was a commonwealth of the US.

The new section 936 allowed the same tax exclusion but forced the companies to still pay US-level wages. The companies would lose the import tariff advantage, but Puerto Rico could sign a treaty with the US in order to ease the flow of economic goods.

This is where the oil came in.

President Roth's trade delegation delivered to Washington what he privately joked, Godfather style, an offer they could not refuse. The offer was simple: Buy all our oil at a huge discount to what the Middle East and Venezuela can offer it, and in exchange we get to import our goods into the US without paying import tariffs.

The Americans of course balked, but then reality settled-in. They had never collected import tariffs from Puerto Rico, so it is not like they would be losing any money. Plus the discount on the oil, which was sweet crude and allowed for more end products, on its own represented a hell of an economic advantage.

The oil reserves in the territorial waters of the island would take 300 years to be emptied under current consumption projections. By then the island would be industrialized and manufacture would provide the income now provided by the oil.

Chapter 6

The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had mandated the creation of a task force to study the national security ramifications of the Puerto Rican issue. A Marine Corps Brigadier General led the task force. In addition to his aide, he had a Full Colonel (Brigadier Designate, Infantry), US Army, as his deputy. The rest of the task force was comprised by intelligence officers and enlisted technicians, in an even mix from all the services.

The General had started operations with a basic premise: that something was going on and it was up to them to find out about it.

The task force was promised the full cooperation of the intelligence community, and already tasking orders had been issued to provide additional photo and radar satellite passes over the island nation.

The initial excitement lasted the 45 hours it took to receive the first assessments from the Intel weenies: Almost a year since the island became a Republic, there was absolutely no military activity.

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President Roth was by no means a pacifist, but he was a very practical man. Defense was a very high priority, but he had coldly calculated that by aligning his economy to the Americans, he could easily cry bloody murder and have the 82nd Airborne Division land in the island if anyone tried to threaten the sovereignty of the island. He had a plan for a military force for the island, but he was not in a hurry.

In less than a year the economy had taken a much needed shot of adrenalin. The first shipment of sweet crude was delivered five days ahead of schedule, which allowed Puerto Rico's public relations machine another excuse to flood the US media with full page ads and 30-second spots on all news shows. Puerto Rico now had representation at the United Nations, and embassies had been opened in England, Germany, Spain, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. More embassies were planned in 15 additional countries.

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The President of the United States was losing his patience. He was paying billions per year to maintain an intelligence apparatus that could tell him every goddamn thing he wanted to know. That is, as long as it was not about Puerto Rico. The new country was turning into a pain in the ass for everyone involved. He really wanted to believe that it was their business and they were entitled to their privacy. Had he been a career politician he could have found a way to convince himself that yes, they are nice fellows and it is OK if they try to hide stuff from the good old U.S. of A. But the reality of the matter was different: he had been a spymaster before he was a politician, and he smelled a rat.

He did not want to give them the free trade provision, but the offer for the sweet crude was just too good to pass. He could use that as leverage against OPEC, since Puerto Rico had turned down OPEC's generous offer to join their cartel.

The one thing he hated above all was that the island nation was now doing better than under US rule.

Chapter 7

San Juan, Republic of Puerto Rico

For the first anniversary of the Republic, President Roth announced a full week of celebrations, speeches and parades. As much as his political enemies hated the idea, most of the people were not ready to turn down a free week of paid vacations. Private industries would receive tax credits to offset giving their employees the week off.

The celebrations would kick off with the announcement that the Senate and the House had given their unconditional approval to the new Constitution, which was loosely modeled on the American constitution but with an eye on closing some of the loopholes still present in the US version. The Constitution still needed to be approved by popular vote, but so far the opinion polls had been extremely positive.

The Constitution warranted the same basic rights and liberties as the US version, but it had some marked differences. Freedom of speech was guaranteed but it had more specific definitions of slander and libel. Discrimination by sex, religion, sexual preference and race were criminalized. Drug use was illegal, with the exception of marijuana. While consumption was legal, the drug must be purchased from a legal dealer. The marijuana itself had a tax stamp just like cigarettes and alcohol. Selling weed without the proper paperwork would carry a prosecution for tax evasion.

Cocaine, heroin, X and other drugs remained illegal, with a “three strikes” clause that would mean an automatic 20-years-to-life sentence for a third conviction of possession with intent to distribute, or for wholesale distribution. Usage was illegal too, but the Puerto Rican politicians came up with

a reasonable compromise: people convicted of usage of drugs in the forbidden list would be forced to perform community services while wearing a jumpsuit that identified them as illegal drug users.

The American Civil Liberties Union did not hesitate to use the groundbreaking marijuana laws in the island nation to push their agenda to legalize marijuana use in the states.

The press of course loved it all. They were getting used to have Puerto Rico enliven their workload, so gradually all major news bureaus started setting up shop at San Juan.

The President also announced the creation of the Puerto Rican Militia, a civilian armed group comprised of all healthy men and women, 21 to 35 years old, that could pass a US Army-level basic training camp. These citizen soldiers would be organized at the town level, and led by former officers of the US Armed Forces. The purpose of this force was outlined in the Constitution as purely for defense of the island nation; it was explicitly illegal to deploy any of these troops outside of the sovereign territories of the Republic. Armories were established at the police stations at each town, and would be under the control of the Secretary of the Interior until the Department of Defense was officially created.

In order to make sure there would be enthusiastic participation by the qualified population, President Roth unveiled the Civil Defense Benefits Act, which outlined certain bonuses and benefits to those who participated in the Militia. The benefits included permission to purchase at the commissaries for the police department, home loan guarantees and scholarships.

A separate Act, the Military Relocation Act, allowed Puerto Ricans in the service of the US Armed Forces to relocate to the island nation at the end of their service. These individuals would form up the core of what would later become the Puerto Rican Army, but would for now work in setting up the training camps and the militia organizations.

The move to start organizing the military was not a surprise. The Pentagon Task Force had been looking into the possibilities for months. Their only mistake was that they had predicted conscription instead a voluntary force. Also, they had not predicted the incentives for Puerto Ricans leaving military service in the US. Their annoyance turned to downright panic when they realized that what President Roth really did was to buy himself a trained army.

Over the next few months thousands of ex-soldiers took advantage of the MRA and were now in the island nation building from scratch all the training

facilities needed. A new phenomenon was discovered: recruitment figures for all American armed services had gone up sharply, and this difference was almost fully composed of an increased influx of recruits from first and second generation Puerto Ricans living in the states, especially in New York and New Jersey.

The Pentagon tried to rewrite the recruitment contracts to forbid recruits from jumping ship after training or even after the end of military service. The proposal never left the pentagon; their own internal lawyers pointed out many constitutional issues that could not possibly be solved, and they were convinced beyond any doubt that if the Puerto Ricans filed a class action suit they would win it.

This meant that for the time being, the United States of America was training a foreign power for free. Since Puerto Ricans are US Citizens, there was no lawfully way to discriminate against them if they tried to enlist in the services or to take a commission. It was just impossible to determine who was doing it to stay and who had planned to bail out and use the MRA. The only legal thing they could do was to order more rigorous background investigations to all recruits, not just Puerto Ricans. If this was done equally then it would not be illegal, or so they desperately hoped. This meant that money budgeted for the purchase of new weapons, equipment, and even fuel had to be used instead to accommodate for his new requirement that all recruits would go through a full background investigation.

When the issue of the security clearances came up, they found themselves once again with their hands tied behind their backs: There was no way to prove wrongdoing, and they did need bilingual US citizens at these jobs.

When the Secretary of State of Puerto Rico approached his counter part in the US to open talks for purchasing military aircraft and ships, he was delicately offered a cold shoulder. They could not just refuse it, but they could stall the process.

The Puerto Ricans expected this reaction, which is why additional delegations were sent to Israel, France and Russia to arrange for the purchase of licenses to built cargo and patrol aircraft and man-of-war ships. The principle was that instead of purchasing these units they would purchase the right to manufacture them. The factories would be located in the island nation, which would create jobs and the excess inventory could be sold to other countries in the area. The defense industries of Israel, France and Russia would not have much to lose, since neither of the three countries had strate-

gic interests in the general area. Plus of course they would make money off the licenses and consulting with the Puerto Ricans on the construction of the factories and the management of the production workflow.

The Puerto Rican Army and the Militia would need reliable rifles and side arms. When the issue was raised, the original idea was to license the standard M16A2 infantry rifle and the short stock M16A3, both from Colt. Again the US State Department gave Puerto Rico the cold shoulder. This was definitely a problem, but since after the original talks about licensing with France, Israel and Russia, all three countries extended additional offers that would include the licensing to manufacture infantry-capable rifles and other particular weapons.

In a grossly miscalculated move on the part of the United States, Puerto Rico now had the capability to build cargo and patrol aircraft at the new Puerto Rico Defense Industries (PRDI) complex in what used to be the former Roosevelt Roads US Navy base, in the eastern coast of the island.

The factories would be staffed by a combined team of engineers and technicians from the three partner countries, and these would be rotated out as their Puerto Rican counterparts were trained and proven their proficiency.

The ships would prove to take a little longer to setup since Puerto Rico did not have a shipyard. Construction would begin immediately, and the first keel of the Navy of Puerto Rico would be laid down within 13 months.

Chapter 8

San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

Two weeks before the second anniversary of the Republic, Amelia, a category-5 hurricane, had mercifully spared the island. There was very little damage to the southern coast of the island, but its path curved northward and it struck both the Dominican Republic and Haiti in full force. The devastation was total, and there was an initial estimate of 475 dead between the two countries.

President Roth immediately mobilized his non-Militia soldiers (the Militia was forbidden by law to operate outside of sovereign territories) and prepared to offer both the Dominican Republic and Haiti planeloads of emergency supplies and also unarmed troops to help in the rescue efforts. Both countries gladly accepted.

The US also offered help, but they would have to base their flights off Miami, while Puerto Rico could stage flights from an abandoned airbase on the western coast, which meant the relief flights could arrive in the Dominican Republic and Haiti within the hour.

While the relief flights were under way, President Roth ordered the reactivation of the base hospital, to be staffed by employees levied from all hospitals across the island. The purpose was to airlift back emergency cases that could not be dealt with back at the disaster areas.

The cost of the initial operation climbed to the order of \$100 million US dollars. Puerto Rico and the US split the initial cost, and the international community donated additional funds.

While his critics tried to question the wisdom of spending the \$50 million on the rescue efforts, President Roth quickly counter-attacked: The Dominican Republic and Haiti are sister countries (and so is Cuba, but he was going through great efforts to not mention Cuba at all until the time was ripe) and it was their moral obligation to help them, cost be damned.

The cynics of the local press failed to notice that this hurricane disaster and its follow-up recovery operation marked the first half of President Roth's first elected term. He was about to prepare to campaign for re-election.

President Roth also took advantage of the confusion to open a temporary embassy (the official embassy had been planned already but was not scheduled for another year) in Haiti to smooth out communications between the two governments.

As soon as the disaster relief efforts were under control, President Roth announced his intention to run for a second term (the Constitution did not have a limit on how many terms a president could serve) and declared his campaign officially open. He knew he would face fierce opposition, so he had two more years to figure out how to neutralize them.

The PNP followers had slowly left the ranks of the party over the first two years of the Republic. The PIP and PPD factions had split between the Progressive Party, now in power, and the Nationalist Party, run by closeted Marxist-Leninists and university intellectuals.

President Roth expected a lot of hot air and rhetoric from the Nationalists, but not much more than that. His biggest concern was dissent within his own party. The economy was incredibly strong, and the coffers of the nation did not feel the pinch from not charging income tax or from the new section 936 companies. The PRDI factories and shipyard made sure there were plenty of jobs for skilled labor. He had gone as far as establishing a grant for US-based college professors to come to the island nation to help revamp the engineering schools at both the University of Puerto Rico and the Polytechnic Institute of Puerto Rico. The main goal was to make sure Puerto Rico was producing an adequate number of engineers that would help grow the PRDIA.

The grant program was a smashing success. Within weeks the Puerto Rico Department of Education was flooded with grant requests from tenured professors from all major engineering schools in the US, plus some from France and Germany. Roth had even toyed with the idea of recruiting industrial efficiency experts from Japan.

President Roth had witnessed the disaster in the US because of the H1B

visa program, and how many jobs were lost to India and Russia due to off-shore outsourcing. He intended to develop local talent and make damn well sure they would be well remunerated for once they graduated.

The idea here was to make the island self-sufficient. Brain and knowledge drain would make the island dependent on imported professionals, a business in which India and other third world countries were getting too good at it, as the US had already found out.

While thinking about the education issue, President Roth kept turning in his head the fact that the island had exported her brightest students to the US and other countries over the years, and that a big percentage of these students graduated and was working elsewhere in a professional capacity.

He needed these bright students back in the island.

President Roth called his Chief of Staff and the two spent the afternoon working on a draft for legislation that would help these students return to the island, the same way it was done for soldiers. The Student Relocation Act (SRA) was born.

President Roth could not help but see the Constitution as one big, cold, planned set-up. He rationalized that it had to be done in such a fashion but it still did not feel right. For example, thanks to his social agenda he had in his hands the tamest democratic legislative body known to the world. He could get away with anything he wanted as long as he did not started doing something stupid, like making people “disappear” like the Argentineans and Chileans did, or worse, to start keeping political dossiers on his enemies. Roth did keep such dossiers, but it was done at a personal level and with no involvement from the government. In the remote possibility that these ever came out he could claim sole responsibility, not like what happened in Puerto Rico about twenty years earlier.

The trick was to take it easy and not do something stupid. He was getting paid one dollar per annum, and so did his whole cabinet. The Presidency had no pension plan: once the President was gone, that was it. Except for a nominal security detail and maybe the request to perform one or two (paid) goodwill missions per year, a former President of Puerto Rico would not receive any benefit after the term of office was over. The dollar-a-year salary angered some of his supporters who expected to see their salaries as a way to measure their relative importance in the scheme of things, but cooler senses prevailed: Public Service was a sacrifice, and nobody could accuse a government official of stealing from the country’s coffers if (a) he is already rich and (b) he is doing the job literally for free.

To offset this, the ethics laws had to be reinforced and be made much more specific. Roth did not want these people giving away favors to offset the salary issue. In the past things could be arranged. For example, your wife's second cousin could get a managerial job at a municipal motor pool, or the electricity bill of the business of a friend of a friend could be forgiven.

Now none of this could be possible.

After hundreds of years of looking at politicians for the crooked villains that a big majority were, over the last two years the people of Puerto Rico started looking at their leaders almost as if in admiration.

This was a calculated move on Roth's part. The \$1/year salary would appeal to the very rich leaders that were looking to make a difference with the country. Roth was not worried about that kind of opposition, he had full dossiers on the top 1% earners of the island, and already had enough skeletons in closets accounted for most of them.

Few things terrorized William Roth. He of course worried about things like a military intervention (for which he was not prepared), or of course the possibility of a coup. Still, these were things that he could do only so much about. The one problem he had was that while he was perfectly capable of fighting off anyone, riches be damned, that tried to take over legally; he basically had no way to fight off a grassroots politician with no monetary resources. The ideal candidate here would be an arts or history teacher in a public school or even a public university. Said teacher would be middle-aged and with a completely clean record.

And also dirt poor.

A person like that could start a small political party and spend five to ten years raising hell one small meeting at a time. A candidate like that could not win a full election but could erode the credibility of the party.

And worse: there was nothing he could do about it. All he could do was keep people around checking on these small time meetings so they could figure out ahead of time who actually had a past that could be exploited and who was completely clean. Once the clean guy arrived, that was all she wrote. The only solution would be to figure out a way to bring the politician in question into the folds of the party, at whatever cost it would take.

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The SRA passed both houses with a comfortable majority, and President Roth soon signed it with great fanfare. The SRA would allow Puerto Rico born students that had finished their course of studies in the top 5% (for baccalaureate degrees only, there would be no cap for graduates of masters

or doctoral programs) of their graduating class to relocate to the island free of charge, and with the same kind of incentives granted to soldiers that qualified for the MRA.

Roth's Chief of Staff made periodical polls to check on the acceptance rate of the new administration. With less than two years left before election they had a lot of work to do and he did not want to have to worry about a lousy approval rate at the last second. His current figures (give or take 3%) gave President Roth's administration an approval rate of 69%. The Chief of Staff was completely convinced that the approval rate would plummet once they were in the last year before of the elections. Regardless of how stupid the opposition was, they would score a lucky shot here and there, and it was his job to prepare for these.

It was time for some preemptive damage control.

The Chief of Staff had known William Roth for over 20 years and knew most of his business dealings. He knew Roth had been a ruthless yet fair businessman, and he was insanely rich so he doubted they would be attacked on the legality of his riches. His personal life was something different: he did not know a goddamn thing about it. He knew where he was born and raised and the schools he went to, plus his military service. The rest was a complete mystery.

The Chief of Staff called one of his contacts in the Police, one of the investigators that made a living running internal investigations about other policemen. The Chief of Staff could not ask for a background check, which would be insane and had the potential to become a political suicide. What he did was ask for background information on close relatives of President Roth on his mother's side (Roth never used his mother's last name as is the Puerto Rican custom). He was hoping to start from these relatives and move on from there.

As soon as he hung up the phone, President Roth summoned him. The call shook up the Chief of Staff and crazy ideas about tapped phone lines started crossing his mind. Still worried about the call and what it meant, he walked back to the presidential offices.

President Roth asked him to close the door and sit down, then proceeded to tear him a new asshole. The message was clear: "the next time you want to know something about me," he said, "the only thing you have to do is ask, not go running to the goddamn police."

The Chief of Staff was not the only curious party. The leadership of the opposition had started making similar inquiries, not knowing that new

accountability procedures had been implemented at the Police and Justice Department archives that would make it literally impossible to retrieve sensitive information without a major conspiracy.

President Roth did not take drastic measures to punish his Chief of Staff. He believed that the fear of repercussion was a hell of a lot better as a motivator to mind his own business than if he actually tried to punish the poor idiot.

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Back in Arlington, Virginia, the Joint Task Force Puerto Rico was still running around chasing blind leads. They were convinced that the creation of the militia was a planned move, and they secretly wished to shoot whoever allowed the plane factories and the shipyard to happen. The General, accusations of unfounded paranoia be damned, was convinced that what the island nation was doing was no different than the way Israel armed itself.

The Task Force was still receiving intelligence take from satellites and electronic emission gathering ships just outside of territorial waters. There was a lot of traffic in reserved radio bands, but it was encrypted. It seems some enterprising son of a bitch sold them the same kind of encrypted radios used by American troops in the field.

Satellite photos also showed new redundant telecommunications facilities being built across the island. The island was already wired 100% for fiber optics, which would prove to be a pain in the ass to intercept, if not downright impossible. Once they had fiber it meant the whole island could be networked, and these redundant facilities would make it very hard to knock out the whole telecom grid in an attack. Not that it would come to that, but the boys at the Pentagon were paid to look at all the angles.

In addition to the redundant stations, the radar satellites noticed spots in the area with a heavy concentration of white noise, almost as if the satellites were being jammed. There was no way to verify this with the satellites, they would need aircraft to fly over and record the electronic emissions so they could be analyzed. And flyovers on an allied country were completely out of the goddamned question.

Chapter 9

Cayey

Republic of Puerto Rico

President Roth, his Secretary of the Interior and the Chief of Staff had flown to the Cayey Mountains in the first helicopter built by PRDI; a design licensed from Eurocopter, basically a slightly modified version of their AC550C3 (known as the “Fennec”). The President loved the helicopter, but he could not wait for the time in which his new crop of college kids would be able to design their own helicopters and airplanes.

Cayey was a bustling city nested in the mountains of the center of the island. There was not much there of official value except a campus of the University of Puerto Rico, a couple of private colleges and a fair-sized satellite ground station built by AT&T and now owned by Puerto Rico Telecom.

Puerto Rico Telecom used to be owned by the commonwealth but was sold to a Spanish conglomerate. President Roth made his first buyout offer to the Spaniards within a week of being sworn into office. Their investors were a bit nervous with the political status ruckus, so they decided to take the money and run.

Puerto Rico once again owned her own telecommunications company.

The President was visiting Cayey for a burial: one of his most vicious opponents had a heart attack while sharing his bed with a woman not his wife. This of course was not public; the only people that knew the truth were the real widow and a few people from his inner circle. Plus President Roth—he always found out the juicy bits.

Right after the funeral, when the helicopter was out of visual range from the burial grounds, the helicopter took a sharp turn to the east and dove until it was flying nape-of-the-earth. The pilot had flown MedEvac (medical evacuation) Blackhawk helicopters for the US Army and got bored flying VIPs in New York City as a civilian, so he jumped at the opportunity when the MRA was enacted. At least flying the President around he got to fly like was trained to.

The helicopter flew between ridges for five miles, and then turned south and into an enclosed valley. The small valley seemed to be empty from above, but upon close inspection the faint outline from a 2-lane paved road started to take shape. The road was painted in a green camouflage pattern so it would blend with the grass at either side.

There were no visible navigation aids to help the pilot find the landing zone: the coordinates were entered into his global positioning system (GPS) navigation console and that was good enough to place the helicopter within 10 meters of the landing zone. Even if the Americans turned on the “selective availability” encryption for GPS, he would still have a position within 30 meters of his intended destination.

The Fennec landed in a seemingly empty spot, but as soon as its passengers left it, they heard vehicles approaching. The vehicles were AMG General Hummers (but everybody called them “Humvees”) purchased from the US when the last military bases were closed. Since the vehicles were surplus, President Roth convinced the Americans to sell them to the Republic of Puerto Rico for what would cost to transport them to the nearest American base, in Florida. There were enough Humvees and 5-ton trucks (President Roth passed on the old 2-1/2 ton trucks, called “Deuce and a half” because they were too worn out) to move a few infantry battalions, which was enough to station a handful at each PR Militia location.

The first two Humvees split and stationed themselves at either side of the helicopter and their occupants set a defense perimeter. The other two vehicles stopped in front of the helicopter; its occupants were not part of the militia: they were German engineers on contract from Siemens.

After the astounding success of the oil deal, the Germans made it plain that they had a not-very-advertised consultancy shop that specialized in defense industries. Over the last year they had quietly assessed whatever the Americans had left, and also helped overhaul the communications and power grids for the island to make it more resilient and resistant to outside attacks. The place they were at, the hidden valley, did not exist in the books.

The seemingly empty valley was actually an artificial dome, and underneath it was a buried laboratory where the Germans were aiding the Puerto Ricans in perfecting an air defense network, a surveillance disruption array and also submarine cables that could be used as SONAR sensors (blatantly copied from the American SOSUS system). In addition the Germans had setup a software programming shop where newer super encryption systems were devised.

The cost was astronomic but it was work that had to be done, and Roth could not go to the Americans for help. The Germans were not interested in warmongering; it was more pleasing to be the leaders of the new European community by virtue of their mastery of business. Since the Puerto Ricans were cash rich and were not a threat, they saw nothing wrong in helping them. Plus to this date the Puerto Ricans had only spent money on defensive measures.

President Roth was visiting to witness a test of the surveillance disruption arrays. The ground above the dome was covered with tiny transducers that would create the same effect as gigantic satellite dish, plus thanks to the electronic wizardry of the Germans, it could be steered at will.

Today's test would involve selectively blinding a commercial photography satellite, which was being used for surveying and urban planning. The array would be aimed in a way that it would disrupt satellite monitoring for a specific section of the island. When the photos from the current satellite pass were downloaded to earth and automatically sent to the company's website, there will be (or so they hoped) a hole in the coverage at a specific time.

President Roth was late for the transmission phase because of the burial ceremonies, but he was going to be able to see the new uploads to the satellite web page.

The test was a complete success: there was a very sharp square where coverage was missing, somewhere in the island fortress of Old San Juan. When the satellite pictures were zoomed, President Roth smiled when he saw that the square was aligned exactly to cover the Capitol Building in the Puerta de Tierra section of San Juan.

President Roth was extremely pleased. If they could selectively jam these photo satellites, nothing stopped them from doing the same to any military satellite that tried to spy on the island. Roth ordered the facility to switch to passive mode: it would use its giant phased array antenna field to track airplanes and satellites, but it would not broadcast any jamming signals without the explicit authorization of the president.

A spare passive array was already in the works and would be built in a remote facility in Mona Island, in the channel between Puerto Rico and the Dominical Republic.

Roth knew it would be matter of hours before the civilian satellite company that operated the photo satellite reported the anomaly to one of the American aerospace conglomerates, which would immediately pass the word to their military contacts.

Chapter 10

Falcon Air Force Base

Colorado Springs, Colorado

The “mids” shift at Falcon Mission Control (FMC) ran from 2300 until 0800. Military and civilians on the mid shift arrived 30 minutes earlier so the “swings” shift (1500 until 0001) had plenty of time to brief the oncoming shift and also to provide a little bit of overlap.

FMC split into different sections. Some groups dealt with telecommunications, others (in separate areas restricted by compartmentalized security clearances) worked on reconnaissance satellites. A third group worked as a liaison to both NASA and foreign space agencies, plus the few purely commercial satellite operators based in the US.

Back in the days of the cold war, FMC could afford its own secure communications center as part of the FMC facility itself. After many years of cutbacks and the crumbling of the Soviet empire, the funding for their own secure communications center was axed. This forced them to share the communications center for the whole base.

As part of the shift change procedures, the lowest ranking enlisted member of the oncoming shift would draw keys to one of the vehicles from their motor pool. This enlisted member would then draw a sidearm and a briefcase with a cable and handcuff welded to it. This person would then proceed by the most direct route to the communications center on the opposite side of the base and pick up any classified message traffic for FMC. Those messages could be classified up to SECRET. If messages arrived at a higher

classification then two armed couriers (one a commissioned officer) would be dispatched. Messages rated as CRITICAL or above would be picked up within 15 minutes of notification through secure telephone by whatever shift was active.

It was a quiet night and the communications center had not called in the middle of the shift to pickup urgent messages, so a single courier was dispatched to pick up the last 9 hours worth of traffic.

The courier, a baby-faced senior airman from Fairfax, Virginia, had his own plans. He signed for a beat-up minivan with General Services Administration (GSA) plates and drove to the 24-hour PX Shopette, where he stocked himself with frozen burritos and Mountain Dew to survive the night shift awake. He thought about the briefcase (which he had thrown in the back seat) but rationalized that until it had documents in it, the briefcase was completely harmless (in reality it was not empty, the cover sheets for documents were recycled, so on the trip to the communications center the briefcase was full of used cover sheets).

The airman got his bag of goodies (he had purchased for both himself and his shift buddy) in the passenger seat and drove to the post communications center. The communications center was a square-shaped building in one remote corner of the base. It did not have windows, and if rumors were true, it had double walls, with a lead liner running between the inner and outer wall to provide electromagnetic pulse (EMP, the electromagnetic explosion that is part of a nuclear detonation) shielding and also TEMPEST shielding (to avoid eavesdropping from electronic emissions).

There were no guards posted, and the door was open. The airman grinned when he noticed the colored tape on the floor, different colors to route people to different sections of the center. He followed the yellow line, which would take him to the night desk. The night desk was actually a vaulted room with a door and an outside iron gate, like a jail cell. The top half of the door opened and a clerk would stuff his briefcase and have him sign the handoff forms once his ID checked.

The reason there were no guards was because all Falcon personnel carried a new style of ID tag with an embedded computer chip that could be read by radio frequency sensors on the doorways. By the time the airman hit the buzzer, the communications clerks knew whom he was and what he was supposed to look like (their security system would display the same information that was stored in his ID card, so they could spot if an impostor had stolen the ID gag). Similar sensors were used throughout the base and were

proving to be pretty handy for things like signing for sick call (since the chip had enough storage to carry the person's medical records).

The whole transaction took less than 10 minutes. The airman checked that all messages were intended for his station, signed the release forms, checked that the printouts and whatever floppy discs and compact discs were secured properly and slammed the briefcase shut. From that moment he was required by law to wear the handcuffs with the cable welded to the briefcase. 15 minutes later he was back at FMC inventorying the classified items for his duty station (everything that was classified had to be accounted for and signed over for each shift change) while the shift chiefs of the swings and the mids had their shift change meeting and went over the message traffic.

Most of the traffic was routine, and the only one that caught their attention was a commercial satellite photography provider complaining about magnetic anomalies: The Air Force was interested in these because they wanted to know how would a cheap commercial satellite react in conditions for which the military satellites were over engineered. If a commercial satellite could perform at a nominal 75% or better of what was expected from a military-grade spacecraft, then it made sense to buy the cheaper commercial spacecraft. Sometimes the difference in cost was so high that it was possible to purchase and support two commercial satellites for what it would cost to launch one military bird.

The report was handed to the same airman that pulled the courier duty since he was the designated satellite controller for the shift. The airman thought bitterly about how it was common practice to give control of these \$300 million satellites to the lowest ranked person on duty, so when things went wrong the person would be expendable.

Not everybody was cut for the job: the last two airmen that trained for that spot had broken down crying because of the stress.

Upon receiving the satellite anomaly report, the airman would swing one of the telemetry antennas and point it at the affected satellite in order to download live telemetry and try to detect a new instance of the anomaly (the "bad" telemetry was already in their hands, it came in one of the compact discs he had picked at the communications center).

While the new telemetry stream synchronized, the airman started browsing through the archived data provided by the satellite company. Two hours (and 3 microwave burritos) later, he walked over to where his shift chief and the lead civilian contractor were playing dominoes. He showed them the printouts from a 5-second period where there was something; he just could

not tell what it was.

The shift chief and the civilian telemetry contractors flipped down their dominoes (they would rotate between dominoes and cards) and split the printouts into two stacks, then each took one set and headed for their desks. The shift chief would look for system faults; the contractors would look for erratic behavior in the payload performance.

Another two hours went by, during which they double-checked their calculations and even went as far as calling a shift meeting to see if anyone could find fault on their reasoning. Right before the shift change for the “days” shift (0700-1700) was about to start, they were convinced somebody had used some kind of selective jamming on the commercial satellite.

Since the FMC director sat every day at the morning shift change, there was no need to activate the emergency notification phone tree (each employee that was called had two numbers to call to pass the message, which would help get the message spread quickly in just a few minutes) and they could just drop the problem on his lap and get it over with.

The FMC director agreed: there was no goddamned reason to wake him up early for something that he could not fix on the spot. Plus he had to check with his colleagues at the National Security Agency (NSA) in Maryland and the National Reconnaissance Office in Virginia. With any luck the spy satellite weenies would tell him there was nothing to worry about: their satellites could not be jammed like what happened to the commercial satellite.

He was wrong.

Chapter 11

Puerto Nuevo

Republic of Puerto Rico

President Roth was a very happy man. He was standing in a podium in front of the first man-of-war ship ever built in the island. She was a patrol cruiser, about the same size as the American Leahy class of cruisers. She had been fitted with state-of-the-art air and surface search radars, and had both a bow-mounted SONAR and a trailing cable SONAR. Plus a last-minute addition: French-manufactured EXOCET anti-ship missiles and Israeli-built anti-air missiles.

Anti-submarine mounts were in place for a later retrofit of torpedo launching rails.

The president gave a moving speech, and after a deafening round of applause from the thousands crowded in the piers, he slammed the Magnum of champagne to christen the cruiser the PRS Conquistador (Puerto Rican Ship Conqueror).

After the dedication ceremony, the President and his newly commissioned Secretary of the Navy (who in a previous career retired as a Rear Admiral (Upper Half), US Navy) led a tour of the ship for the benefit of the press and both military and diplomatic observers from the US, Canada, Mexico, Germany and Italy.

President Roth damn well knew that the main purpose of these military observers was to spy on him, but there was nothing he could do about it; it was the way that the game had been played since the beginning of time. Plus

his spies were better than their spies.

After the tour he announced that an additional six keels were ready to be laid on, and there was enough space in the shipyards for two additional keels. There was no need for him to specifically say that this additional manufacturing capability was at the disposal of their respective countries. President Roth already knew he would have these two spots at full capacity for the next five years, but did not know if the demand would be high enough to trigger a bidding war for spots in the waiting list. The President made a mental note to bounce this idea off his cabinet; if they agreed with him maybe it was time to secure financing for another two spots. Or better, make the customer countries finance the whole thing!

The Dominican Diplomat (actually a military intelligence officer in disguise) thought that while it was a hell of a deal, it also meant that now his starving nation had an oil-rich country just miles to the east, and they had both a navy (even if for now it just had one ship) and the capability to airlift a sizable amount of troops. The diplomat was aware of the non-deployment clause for the militias, but he was not stupid. He was convinced that the same way President Roth used to fill the ranks of the militia would work handsomely for the creation of the official Army of Puerto Rico.

Chapter 12

Off the coast of San Juan

USS Wyoming, SSBN 742, an Ohio class fleet ballistic submarine now converted to intelligence gathering missions, was trolling-off the international maritime boundary north of San Juan. While the ship was perfectly capable to penetrate the invisible line that marked the sovereign waters of the Republic of Puerto Rico, the politics of the situation dictated that they performed their mission from at least 3 nautical miles from the boundary. The additional distance would not make much difference in their mission, but psychologically the captain of the vessel and her crew felt like a dog on a leash.

The Wyoming had been tasked with gathering electronics emissions off the government buildings scattered all over the old San Juan island fortress.

So far they had not gathered a goddamn thing.

Their guess was that the Puerto Ricans had abandoned microwave tower transmission and were using buried fiber optics and satellite links. That being the case it was a waste of time and the taxpayer's money to troll off the coast of the island listening to atmospheric white noise.

Since that cause was already lost, the submarine switched to plan "B." They would stick around a little bit and try to grab signals from things the Puerto Ricans could not avoid using the radio for, like aircraft communications, police cars, whatever they could find. A NSA crew was on board to perform signal analysis on the gathered communications and at least identify if any kind of encryption device was being used.

Again, there was nothing but atmospheric noise. The initial assessment

of the NSA techs was that the government of Puerto Rico had purchased burst-transmission radios, and that these were encrypted. Tapes of the atmospheric noise were packaged and transferred to a submarine tender 50 miles north of San Juan, in case NSA at Fort Meade could figure out a way to at least get a digital thumbprint of the encryption gear used.

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The Puerto Ricans had scheduled maritime surveillance flights along the major shipping corridors, just to make sure there was nobody prowling around. They were specifically interested in stray drug-carrying flights from the idiots that had not yet figured out that in the New Puerto Rico it was not a good idea to get caught with a Cessna crammed to the hilt with cocaine.

The surveillance planes used similar technology to planes used by both the US Navy and NATO forces to monitor ships and detect submerged ships by measuring how their metallic hulls distorted the earth's magnetic field. Some of the crewmen had worked in these planes while in the US Navy, and it did not take a lot of time for them to notice the two American submarines trolling outside of the territorial waters boundary. They knew there was not much they could do (their aircraft was unarmed) but at the same time they decided it was worth reporting up the chain of command that the US was so worried about whatever the hell was going on in Puerto Rico that they sent their two worst sub captains.

Two idiot submarine captains that could not hide from a maritime patrol plane 3 miles away, staffed with a crew not yet trained up to spec.

This would of course change in the case of an escalation, but they thought it was worthwhile to know this. The crewmen wondered if the submarine detected them but they did not notice any air search radar emissions.

**

President Roth did not receive the news about the submarines very well. He had predicted that surveillance attempts would ramp up, but he did not expect them to send submarines so quickly.

The President issued new directives to the surveillance flights: Until further notice the surveillance aircraft would work in tandem instead of alone, and any contacts that even brushed the boundary zone would be reported on the spot instead of at the end of the flight. This was both hard on the crews and the aircraft, since their maintenance crews were not yet up to speed and PRDI had not started yet local production of the electronics surveillance gear used by these planes.

Roth also started thinking about diversification: He had too many of his

eggs in the German basket. Germany and the US were allies, and it was only a matter of time before some brownnosing asshole handed over to the Americans the keys for the encryption chips used by most of his radios. All his agreements with the Germans had poison pill clauses that would cost the Germans (there were similar deals with the French and the Israelis) dearly if they ever strayed off the line in one of their contracts. The oil contract was the most sensitive but the production pipeline was in place and Siemens was still there in a consulting capacity. They could afford to kick them out of the island overnight and the oil would continue to flow.

Of course, Roth did not want that. He wanted the Germans so cozy they would not even bear the thought of betraying them just to earn brownie points with the Americans. The president was prepared to go as far as blackmailing the German executives if he had to (they were extremely sensitive to the skeletons buried in their closets) but he hoped common sense and downright avarice will keep them to his side. If that did not work, then he would resort once again to his uncanny ability to dig up dirt on anyone he set his mind to.

The Israelis and the French were easier to deal with: they did not trust anyone, not even him. France was strapped for cash; they dealt with him just because they had no other choice. Israel, on the other hand, was a little reluctant but in the end cooler heads prevailed and the sales went through. Plus they were about to make concessions that would allow them to build some of their aircraft and tanks in the island, since manufacturing space was not an issue like back in the holy land.

Chapter 13

La Perla, Old San Juan Fortress

Republic of Puerto Rico

With the kickoff of the election season looming a few months ahead, President Roth had to switch his attention to social issues. The tax gamble and the recreated section 936 gave an incredible boost to the economy, but that was not enough. Housing and education were still hurting.

President Roth was standing at the gates of the Old San Juan Cemetery, between the walls of El Morro (the fortress at the western tip of the Old San Juan walled island) and La Perla, a very old and rundown neighborhood that for years had been an eyesore when compared to the rest of the Old San Juan sector.

With the President was the Director of the Puerto Rican Urban Development Commission, plus a handful of the island's most famous architects and finally the Director of the Social Services Administration. The men and women were surrounded by press and by curious bystanders. The President's police escort were nowhere to be found, but it was assumed they were dressed in civilian clothes and blending in with the crowd. Probably one or two were posing as reporters.

The purpose of the gathering was to announce a new urbanization law that would attempt to alleviate the terrible housing situation in the most crowded towns of the island.

There is a curious custom in Puerto Rico, named "Invasiones" (Invasions). While in the states it is not unheard of to see one family settle in a

property they do not own or rent, usually called squatting, in Puerto Rico it happens in a much bigger and organized scale. The invaders plan ahead and show up at a big tract of land and lay out lots for a few hundred families. Overnight these families all arrive at the same time with enough building materials to quickly raise a shantytown in just a couple of days. As soon as the police start harassing them they start running resistance through political means, usually with the help of religious leaders. As the political situation rages, the shantytown starts transforming itself into a normal town with real houses and dirt-paved roads. Once the shanties give way to houses that could in theory stand a category-5 hurricane, the government then calls it quits and arranges to pave the streets and provide electricity and water service. The final step would be to issue deeds to the occupants, but this did not always happen.

President Roth's plan was to scour the island of these shanties and help these people build real houses in lots they owned. The first governor elected by Puerto Ricans under the Commonwealth, Luis Muñoz Marín, had for a long time confiscated little parcels of terrain from farmers to give them to poor people so they could have a house and have a little vegetable garden. Many times this generous gesture was wasted, since most of the recipients exchanged these tracts of land for a horse or a cow.

Under the new model, a person that had never owned land in the island and was presently living illegally in one of the 50 worst (the plan would be funded to deal with the invasions in blocks of 50) established invasion areas would be eligible to receive a deed for a quarter of an acre elsewhere in the same municipality. The lots would be prepared to receive electrical and water/sewer service and paved street access would be guaranteed. The government would allow the new homeowner to choose between 5 house models, all built from prefabricated sections of steel-reinforced concrete. The conditions: The new homeowner must keep the deed for 30 years and this deed could only be transferred before that date because of divorce or death. Also, each homeowner would sign a no-criminal-usage waiver: if the owner was convicted of a felony and this felony was performed within said property, the property would revert to government control.

The idea was to give these poor people a way out of the slums. They got to pick from five generously sized houses that were completely hurricane-proof (since the walls and roof were concrete, and the windows were aluminum blinds, there was not much for the hurricane to tear off).

The only problem was seasonal flooding, and the houses were built so in

case of flooding the electrical wiring and the plumbing would not be ruined. After the flood receded it would be a matter of just hosing off the floors (the flooring was a kind of polished stone that looks like marble but is much cheaper) and maybe painting the walls.

The President announced the first ten invasions that would qualify for the land and house giveaway. There was an accompanying penal code provision for abusers of the program, since it was not too hard to imagine some enterprising individual trying to twist the system for his own benefit.

Both the Puerto Rican and international presses, especially in England, the US and Germany, were extremely generous in their editorials about the new social initiatives of President Roth. Former US President Carter went as far as flying to Puerto Rico to offer President Roth his support to raise funds to expand the program, since it was in the same spirit of the Habitat for Humanity program that former President Carter had supported for many years. President Roth graciously accepted and confided in him that one of the things that inspired him to push the program was the impact it had on him as a younger man when he saw former President Carter on TV, hammer in hand and helping build houses for poor people. The former president of the US beamed with delight and he promised further visits in the near future.

The Chief of Staff could not believe his good luck: The idea of the housing was a political home run. It would be political suicide to try to run against a President that in about three years managed to kick-start the oil operation and the licensed aircraft factories and shipyards, which brought in a lot of cash into the island and also created many jobs. Then on top of that he killed the personal income tax and created a hell of a corporate tax shelter with the section-936 law reactivation, which created even more jobs. Add to this the Military and Student Relocation acts, and the creation of the militia. And if that was not enough, he had started giving away nice housing to thousands of poor people.

The Chief felt he had his job almost cut for him, but he was paid to be paranoid and still prepared to fight all the way to reelection if it came down to that. He had just hired two new speechwriters and an image consultant to help polish his boss' rough edges a little bit more. He also took under retainer a political strategy consulting shop in Washington, to help him prepare to fight any interference from the Americans.

Other countries were not blind to all these developments, and they had started to pay more attention to whatever was happening in the island. Venezuela was not happy because the Puerto Rican oil exports were undermining theirs,

and the people of Venezuela had never seen themselves as different from the Puerto Ricans. When President Roth started cutting taxes and creating new industries, students in Venezuela started organizing protests to harass the government into studying similar actions.

The President of Venezuela damn well knew he could not do it, but it irritated him that his own people were being so unreasonable about it. The Puerto Rican oil was classified as “sweet” and had a better yield than Venezuela’s, and they also had a secured trading partner. Plus they were still not members of OPEC (Roth’s refusal to join OPEC was not a public matter).

It was hard as hell to compete in equal terms.

The President of Venezuela had tried to send an economic delegation to Puerto Rico to suggest they would get together and help each other by fixing the per-barrel prices so both countries could benefit. The official reply, in the form of a letter, stated President Roth’s deepest thanks for Venezuela’s kind offer for cooperation. The unofficial reply, which was a direct phone call from President Roth to the President of Venezuela, was short and to the point: he could go fuck himself.

**

The American President felt a pang of guilt for his first reaction to the news on the housing initiative.

The son of a bitch is trying to buy the vote of the poor.

The only reason he felt guilty about it was that he would have done the same too. He had to give it to Roth: he knew what the hell he was doing. The American President thought very hard about this: he was spending too much energy keeping an eye on the new Caribbean nation when he should be minding his own country’s needs. He asked his wife if it was OK that they left for Camp David for the weekend one day ahead, and invited the third of the cabinet he considered his inner circle. He would wine and dine them at the presidential retreat in rural Maryland and then on Sunday afternoon he will make his pitch.

**

The Pentagon task force was not having a good Thursday. Their best Spanish speaking intelligence analyst had called-in sick and they were up to their necks in contact reports. The Navy missions were not working, and NSA had reported none of their tapes was good; some sort of magnetic disturbance had wiped them clean before they were transferred from SSBN Wyoming to the sub tender ship.

The General was now convinced that it was a matter of months before he would wake up to see CNN reporting the establishment of a legitimate Puerto Rican Army. Not only that, they would be riding on Humvees that the US President sold to them for a pittance!

That meant they would have two armies, one non-deployable (if he was to believe that Mickey Mouse clause in their constitution that made it illegal for the militia to act outside of their sovereign territory). The General was willing to bet his golf bag on the composition of this new army; he was pretty goddamned sure that a big percentage of the cadre and officers would be also members of the militia.

This could turn into another Israel, with guns in every house.

The poor bastard picked to run an operation to invade the island will find himself landing on an island with 4 million pissed off people with the same right to bear arms as an American citizen, only their arms will be supplied at no cost by their own government. And most of them will be trained in American Military doctrine. Goddamn them!

An invasion would be out of the question. He had his in-house lawyers sift through the new constitution of the island nation to check for loopholes that would allow Roth to turn it into a banana republic. There were none to be found. His lawyers stated that the constitution had less holes than the American version on which it was based. They also checked the laws that enacted the militia and were not reassured when they saw it clearly spelled out that members of the militia would be disqualified from serving as part of an official army of Puerto Rico, but only if they were to be assigned to units with potential deployable status. This meant that yes, they could join the Army too, but they could only operate within the island.

The General thought it was nicely worded bullshit. Once the bullets start flying they would forget about that clause as soon as it was convenient for them.

The invasion would not work. What if they tried to invade somebody else? What about the Dominicans? Or Cuba?

It would not work, the island was not over populated yet, and the Dominicans did not yet have infrastructure in place to exploit their natural resources. Plus there was Haiti.

The General thought he was stuck between the proverbial rock and the hard place. He was aware that he did not know a goddamn thing, but his instincts kept him alive through two wars so he owed it to himself to put an honest effort. He decided that for the hell of it he would write a paper

exploring the possibilities of Puerto Rico expanding in the Caribbean basin over the next 10-15 years.

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The missing Spanish-speaking intelligence analyst was First Lieutenant Robert M. Sharpley, US Army Signals Corp (detached Military Intelligence). Lieutenant Sharpley was the son of the Reverend Anthony Michael Sharpley, who spent most of his 35 year career building rural churches in Puerto Rico. Lieutenant Sharpley's middle initial stood for "Mario," the name of a local minister that Reverend Sharpley admired a great deal. The Lieutenant was raised in Puerto Rico and had already made up his mind that what the United States was trying to the newly created nation of Puerto Rico was both immoral and illegal. He boarded the first plane to San Juan with just a change of clothes and old and battered bible. The bible had pages hidden into its bindings with internet addresses and passwords for servers that held all of Lieutenant Sharpley's working documents, most of them classified Top Secret or higher.

It would take three days before anyone noticed he was missing.

**

President Roth still had something bugging him since the day he was elected President. He was confident he knew enough of his political enemies to keep them from becoming a real threat, but there was a legitimate danger in smaller political figures not yet corrupted by the system. These naive politicians if smart could make a lot of trouble.

What really terrified Roth was the potential to run against a sincere and poor politician. A guy like that would sweep the lower classes without even trying. He (Roth was not being sexist, he just knew it would be a man) would attack his riches and at the same time his record would be pristine, so Roth would not have skeletons to drag out of his opponent's closet.

The worst thing is he had no way of fighting it. He could not try to find these potential honest politicians because he would be no different than a dictator trying to weed out the intellectuals before they raise hell. The only thing he could do was to wait.

Chapter 14

Off the coast of San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

The USS Wyoming was on the final days of her patrol off the coast of the island. In a few more days she would be taken back to her homeport in Kings Bay Georgia, where she would be converted from a fleet ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) into a guided missile submarine (SSGN). Her nuclear missiles and launchers will be removed and replaced with 140 Tomahawk missiles, plus a SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) mini submarine, berthing and equipment to support up to 66 special operations troops.

The crew was already beyond bored, and the captain had resigned himself to spending a couple more days in his command before having to return it for the conversion. He did not know if he would screen for flag rank, so he was more worried about having to put in retirement papers when he got back to Georgia than about what was left of the mission.

Due to the overall lack of interest from the crew, they started missing on the little things. Sonar spent their time running simulations on tracking Russian submarines that did not exist anymore (their rusting hulls could be seen from satellite, tied alongside docks in their home ports). The torpedo room spent its days playing with their maintenance dummy. The captain had not even run a general quarters drill in almost a week.

The only people that were still doing the same job as usual were the cooks and the medics.

Had somebody been paying attention to the depth soundings they would

have noticed that the contours of the sea floor underneath shifted considerably from the charts they were using. The navigator was assuming a bare minimum of 100 feet under the keel at all times, but that distance eventually became less than 20 feet, while the crew was oblivious.

The area where the submarine was trolling had a long history of chaotic seismic activity but the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had only done two bathymetry readings in the last 25 years, and these readings were most of the basis for the charts used by the Wyoming. The seismic activity shifted the underwater topography; something the captain of the Wyoming should have been familiar with and aware of.

Instead, he worried about his pension and what to do with his retirement. He left his executive officer (XO) in the bridge and decided to sit in his cabin and outline his options.

As he was about to climb out of a metal ladder on his way to his quarters, an impact shook the submarine, making him slip and hit his head on a steam pipe. The last thing he heard before he lost consciousness was the general quarters alarm over the submarine's PA system.

The XO felt the impact and called general quarters by instinct, and then ordered the engines to full stop. His next command was to request a damage report and to call the captain over the PA. Until the captain arrived back at the bridge he had to try to pass like he knew what the hell he was doing.

The impact was due to an immense boulder that had rolled after a small submarine quake. The boulder hit with enough force to bend the propulsion shafts, which after losing their delicate balance proceeded to rip the shafts and their reducing gears to pieces. The gearboxes blew up killing half a dozen sailors unlucky to be in the area. The engine room knew there was something wrong and kicked in their emergency reactor response plans, so the drive train was already disconnected before they even knew the screw took a hit and the shaft was bent.

The engineering chief crossed his finger and prayed that none of the shrapnel from the gearbox punctured an important line. Or worse, the ballast tanks.

Once the damage and casualty reports started coming in, the XO's mind went into high gear. It was then when he realized the CO was missing. He tried calling again on the PA and then sent a runner to try to fetch him.

With the nuclear reactor offline the boat (submarines are boats, only vessels that travel above water are entitled to be called ships) was at the mercy

of the currents. There was some limited steerage capability, but still would put them at the mercy of the strong currents that headed into the mouth of San Juan bay.

The Wyoming would not be able to steer itself for long once it lost its momentum, and the bridge crew was too excited to notice they had slipped into Puerto Rican territorial waters.

It took another 15 minutes to find the CO, who was still unconscious and now at sickbay. The medical officer could not tell how long it would take for him to regain consciousness, so the XO was to consider himself under command until the medical officer certified that the CO was fit to return to duty.

The XO called the weapons and sonar officers to witness the removal of the CO's missile key, which was placed in the crypto safe. Once the key was safe, the XO directed the chief of the boat (the senior enlisted man aboard) to change their depth to periscope depth so they could raise their communications mast and report the accident back to base.

**

A flight of two Puerto Rican maritime surveillance aircraft had been practicing tandem drills when they noticed the magnetic anomaly right above the international waters boundary. Thinking it was the hulk of a sunken cargo ship, they decided to use it as target practice for their tracking gear.

After two passes the tracking party commander of the lead aircraft noticed there was something wrong: the anomaly was moving. He suggested his pilot (in theory the pilot commanded the aircraft, but once in tracking mode he was at the service of the tracking party commander) coordinate turns with the second aircraft and try another tracking pass above the anomaly.

For the second time both aircraft corroborated the anomaly was moving, and that could only mean one thing: a submarine. The pilot of the lead aircraft called base and started the emergency notification process.

It took President Roth 10 minutes to find out there was a submarine violating the territorial waters boundary. His people would not be able to identify the country, but he had a fair idea that it would be an American submarine instead of Russian or British. The British had no imperial ambitions in the area since at least 100 years before, and the Russians still had Cuba to deal with.

The President guessed that the submarine was probably snooping around and got lost. The patrol craft reported that the sub was moving very slowly,

almost too slow to steer. This could be either on purpose (to make sure the vessel would not emit any noise, which made it invisible to sonar) or maybe it had an accident and that was as fast as it could move.

President Roth called his science adviser on one of their new encrypted phones and tried to see if he had any ideas. His adviser suggested that if the surveillance planes had sonobuoys maybe they could scatter some above the submarine and scare it into doing something. Since it was well within their territorial waters it would not be a hostile act. Plus what the hell, you can't sink a submarine by pinging it with sonar.

President Roth agreed with the idea and relayed it to ground control.

**

The XO of USS Wyoming had ordered a full walk-through of the vessel to double check for damage. As the Wyoming continued drifting powerless, it started to develop a list to starboard, which meant either a ballast tank had punctured or one of the control surfaces was bent. Thankfully there were few casualties; except for the CO (still unconscious) and one broken leg when a torpedo fell off its mount, there were only bumped heads and a few scratches here and there.

The XO did not bother changing depth; he was still waiting for a reply to his emergency report. He kept running things in his head; he was worried that he missed something. Then he figured it out and raced to the bridge to check on their position.

He decided to look for himself before chewing on the navigation officer and the chief of the boat. They were now five miles inside of the 12-mile territorial waters boundary claimed by Puerto Rico. He ordered the communications mast raised again and sent a second report.

**

Now that they had the anomaly (they could not push themselves to call it a target, since they were not carrying weapons aboard) within a half-mile square, the crews of the two airplanes prepared themselves for the unknown reaction from the submarine once the sonobuoys hit the water.

President Roth had ordered PRS Conquistador and two light police boats to head for the area. Conquistador did not have anti submarine weapons (only sonar), but it was the only military vessel in the bay area. The Conquistador's twin, PRS Vieques, had been kept in the dry docks for a last-minute addition of side-mounted torpedo launchers purchased from Norway.

The Conquistador was manned with a skeleton crew consisting of former US Navy officers and petty officers that had taken advantage of the MRA,

plus a handful of civilian contractors still working on fine tuning the ship's systems. Just before the patrol aircraft called to confirm the sonobuoy drop, the captain of the Conquistador received a call from the command post in the Old San Juan fortress island. The captain was not shocked, but actually asked the orders to be repeated just to double check he was not dreaming. He hung up the phone and smiled just a little bit.

The two patrol aircraft setup their buoy drops; the lead craft would drop a line of sonobuoys at a 45 degree angle from the path of the submerged contact, while the second craft would drop her sonobuoys in a line perpendicular to the first drop.

As soon as the second drop was completed, the captain of PRS Conquistador ordered his bow-mounted sonar to full active mode.

As soon as the first sound wave hit the USS Wyoming, twenty sailors collectively thought "Oh shit!."

The XO had to control his urge to scream at the sonar man second class that reported "multiple active sonar sources from what seem to be sonobuoys." Then corrected his report by adding the presence of a "solid active sonar source within 3,000 yards."

He (and everybody else on the boat) goddamn well knew somebody was hammering them with active sonar, they could hear it as it bounced off the ship!

There was nothing they could do about it, and the XO was sure that his rules of engagement explicitly forbid him to fire a weapon unless fired upon first.

As long as nobody took a shot at them, they would have to sit it through.

The XO ordered the ESM (a mast with electronics sensors) and Communications masts. He wanted a quick sweep to see what was out in the surface and maybe in the air, plus he wanted to see if he had replies to the two messages he sent earlier.

The ESM mast caught on some of the radio chatter from the two patrol aircraft, and a ship borne surface search radar that was too close to one the Israelis stole from the US 15 years earlier.

The radioman announced replies to the two messages had been received. The XO rubbed his eyes in disbelief and handed the messages to the weapons officer and the chief of the boat to make sure he was not imagining things.

Both the weapons officer and the chief of the boat concurred that the messages ordered USS Wyoming to surface and fly a US flag, and to try to stall the Puerto Ricans until USS Cole, the closest US ship, could get

permission to enter Puerto Rican territorial waters to assist Wyoming.

The XO sent a message acknowledging the orders and then ordered the chief of the boat to surface the ship and host the Stars and Stripes ASAP.

**

The crews of both patrol aircraft erupted in applause when the submarine surfaced.

The captain of PRS Conquistador called back to the operations center to report on the surfacing. The officer in charge of the operations center did not hesitate to call President Roth, who had left orders to be called the second the submarine either surfaced or left Puerto Rican waters.

Roth immediately ordered the Chief of Staff to call the US embassy and request a meeting with the ambassador at his earliest convenience.

The ambassador was already briefed on the accident and was awaiting the summons, so he replied he would be most grateful if they could meet at the Department of State building in one hour.

Roth ordered PRS Conquistador to receive the intruding submarine with whatever military honors they could come up with, and to render whatever assistance was required.

**

The XO of USS Wyoming was at the conning tower, observing PRS Conquistador and the two Police boats changing their course and starting to head their way. He could see that the level of the activity on the deck of the cruiser was increased, and then finally realized what was happening.

Whatever crew in the Conquistador was wearing a presentable uniform had been ordered to stand at parade rest by the portside rails. When the Conquistador was on a parallel course with the Wyoming, the XO heard a loud whistle and all the sailors performed a perfectly synchronized salute.

The XO had not seen a foreign ship perform that maneuver since the Germans did it for the Americans on the second anniversary of the September 11, 2003 terrorist attacks. It was a moving scene that brought tears to the eyes of most of the men standing watch at the conning tower.

After the maneuver was completed, the Conquistador continued her trajectory as she gracefully circled the disabled submarine. The cruiser continued with this maneuver until it completed a full circle, then stopped a few hundred yards away.

The Conquistador launched a boat with 4 sailors in full white uniforms and no visible weapons. The XO nodded to the chief of the boat, the signal

for him to set free the detail of sailors that would unroll the landing rope ladders the Puerto Rican sailors would need to climb aboard.

Two of the sailors climbed up, then saluted the Officer of the Deck and the US Flag, and asked permission to come aboard. After a brief introduction the Puerto Rican officers explained that arrangements were being made to allow USS Cole passage into their territorial waters to assist them, and that their medical and support facilities were available if they were needed before the USS Cole arrived. The senior officer handed the XO a standard Lloyd's of London salvage contract: if the submarine was in danger of sinking before the USS Cole arrived, Puerto Rico would claim salvage on the submarine, which under the standard contract granted them a percentage of the value of the property recovered.

The XO had been expecting the contract; it was standard procedure. He signed it and handed it back. The Puerto Rican sailors saluted once more and requested permission to leave the ship.

The sound of helicopter blades made the XO and the chief of the boat look up. They had not noticed that while their little exchange was taking place, half a dozen news helicopters of the type used to report on traffic conditions were hovering above.

Chapter 15

Washington, DC

All major news outlets reported on the violation of the sovereignty of Puerto Rico. Accusations of gross dereliction of duty were already being voiced on live TV even before the captain of the USS Wyoming had regained consciousness in San Paul's Hospital in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. The only other sailor at the hospital was the one that broke his leg when a torpedo fell off its mount.

President Roth was playing the press with great finesse. While he did not directly attack the US for the intrusion, he did not discard the possibility of seeking legal remedies for the violation. While he was doing this, he sent a VIP plane to Georgia to fetch the wife and daughters of the captain of the Wyoming, so when he woke up from his coma the first thing he saw was their face. The torpedo technician's wife was flown in the same flight.

When the USS Cole arrived, the PRS Conquistador moved further to allow them maneuver room. Sailors from both the USS Cole and the USS Wyoming were granted a blanket visa while preparations were made to bring ships to tow Wyoming back to Georgia. Since it was found that Wyoming was in no danger of sinking, she was towed to the piers in San Juan alongside Cole. A security point was established at the entrance to the pier and US Marines were the only personnel performing security for the ships from the pier side. From the seaside a Puerto Rican Police patrol boat (with a US Navy ensign as an observer) kept an eye on anyone trying to creep in from seaside.

Lower enlisted men and junior noncommissioned officers from both the

Wyoming and the Cole were handed meal vouchers that would be honored by all restaurants in the Old San Juan island fortress. Officers and senior noncommissioned officers were taken to the Officers Club in the old Fort Buchanan for a banquet.

It was a pleasant affair overall if you wanted to ignore the fact that the sovereignty of a country was violated.

President Roth had his Secretary of State draft a diplomatic note that outlined the nature of the violation and requested reparations. The note was barely a half page long, but it took the combined efforts of the Chief of Staff and half the cabinet almost three hours to get the wording just right. The Puerto Rican Secretary of State delivered the note to the ambassador, who gracefully accepted it and excused himself to consult with his government.

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The President of the United States was running out of patience with the incompetence of the people that worked for him. He had just finished a briefing on the submarine mess in San Juan bay and he just could not believe his bad luck.

As if there was such thing as bad luck. He was willing to blame it on incompetence (plus the bad luck of having the captain of the sub incapacitated in the one moment he was really needed), but it did not stop him from being madder than hell about the whole situation.

The Puerto Ricans were right, and the whole country would end up paying for the fuck up in the submarine. To make things worse, the Puerto Ricans played the situation really goddamn well, even better than what I would have done if I were in the Puerto Rican president's shoes.

The whole thing with the crews saluting from the manned rails was just brilliant. And the bastards had sent news crews everywhere, so now the whole country was seeing on CNN how, instead of throwing everybody in jail, they took both crews (except the Marines of course, these were left behind guarding the ships) and took them to party all night long.

That Puerto Rican president is one calculating son of a bitch. I have to grant him that much.

President Wheeler knew that there was no way in hell he could escape paying the Puerto Ricans for reparations and for salvaging. Roth wanted one billion dollars for violating their territorial waters. And he wanted to invoke the Lloyd's of London salvage clause, which would mean he would have to pay a percentage of the current market value of the submarine. That was a hell of a lot of money.

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The next day, the crews of the two ships woke up in their plush accommodations in the Caribe Hilton in San Juan. They had taken over most of the hotel, to the delight of the night manager. Even if everybody was pretty plastered, everybody had been in his or her best behavior. Rum was cheap and the girls were pretty: that is all that mattered.

The hotel did not have the facilities to run a buffet breakfast for the two crews in such a limited notice, so they hired buses to drive the sailors to the nearby Caribbean Conventions Center, where the sailors were received with an immense breakfast buffet and then all the local employees were told to leave so the sailors could run staff meetings broken down by ship.

President Roth received the preliminary answer from Washington: they offered to pay \$750 million in reparations, and offered a 10% salvage fee instead of the standardized 15%. Roth had two choices here. He could take the money, which he could damn well put to use in the island, or he could twist their arms until they either yield or the arm breaks.

The President would have loved to twist the arms, but what was important for the country was the admission of guilt. He could have taken a \$1 reparations payment as long as the Americans admitted that they did something wrong.

President Roth sent his reply: The \$750 million would be an acceptable compromise, but the salvage fee should be higher than 10%, so he offered them 12%.

The reply came five minutes later. Once the submarine was tugged out of Puerto Rican waters the US would pay Puerto Rico \$894 million based on the insured cost of \$1.2 billion.

President Roth prepared himself to spend it as fast as he could; elections were less than a year away.

Chapter 16

University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus

El Colegio de Agricultura y Artes Mecánicas de Mayaguez (loosely translated: “The Mayaguez A&M”) is the oldest and most prestigious engineering school in the Caribbean basin. The school shamelessly took advantage of affirmative action programs in every major high-technology corporation in the US, which ensured the engineering labs were always equipped with state of the art gear. Almost all of its engineering professors were educated in the US or in England. The only native professors taught liberal arts and earth sciences.

The Mayaguez Campus is a nice and expansive area east of the center of the city. The two main gates face the town, plus smaller gates at the opposite end give access to back roads. Most of the engineering faculties are within campus grounds, except for the Chemical and Civil Engineering faculties, who are located in the back of the campus, across from one of the back roads that circle the perimeter. The main reason the Civil Engineers were there was because of their road materials labs; these were so noisy and messy that the University gave them their own corner where they could make their mess without others noticing.

The Chemical Engineers were relegated to that same remote area, the legend says, in case some crazy student blows up the building.

All the other engineering faculties were clustered on the south most hill of the campus, the one that overlooks the secondary athletic fields. Mechanical Engineering had the top of the hill, and a combined monstrosity that held the general, electrical, industrial and computer-engineering faculties was on

the northern slope. The only other buildings on the crest of the hill were the student aid office and the ruins of a building that fell after an earthquake many years off. The only remaining part of the building was the arc above the main door, and it eventually became the centerpiece of the coat of arms of the school.

The monstrosity was called the Cesani building. It consists of an array of smaller buildings and a tower, connected by walkways. Later more classrooms and labs were added to the sides of the walkways to make most use of the space. The end result, the monstrosity, had most of the qualities of a maze.

The lower level of this building had a row of tiny laboratories, barely big enough for a doctoral student and a professor to sit down, since most of the room would be taken over by equipment of some sort.

Lab #4 had a small table pushed into one corner. It held a battered IBM Thinkpad laptop, a package with half a ream of laser printer paper and a pyramid (which took most of the table's remaining space) built with at least 100 cans of Coca Cola.

There was a laser printer somewhere in the mess of boxes of manuals, discarded computer parts and spools of network wire and fiber optics cables under the desk.

An industrial machinery table occupied the rest of the lab. It was a massive table with air cushions built into the legs that isolated it from the vibrations of the ground. Level bubbles were built into the sides of the table to help in keeping it perfectly level. Half the table was used to hold electronic measuring gear (connected through fiber optics to a data relay box, which then connected to the laptop through its universal serial port). The other half was used to the specimen.

The specimen was the product of three years of postdoctoral research: It was barely the size of a cigarette pack (could be made smaller but they ran out of money) and it packed enough power to run low power devices for an incredible amount of time: the laptop was connected to an earlier model of the specimen and had been running nonstop for a week.

The current model of the specimen would be able to power a small car for 8 to 10 hours, depending on the efficiency of its aerodynamics and the gearing of the transmission. If they played tricks with energy recycling devices they could recharge the battery with the energy of the brakes whenever these were actuated. That would give it an extra hour or two of juice.

The project was secret and funding was not really an issue. The main

reason it was located in the lower corridors of the faculty was to keep a low profile. Only two people worked in the project, and both had signed confidentiality agreements. In exchange for their complete silence they would be listed as principals on the patent (which would be registered as property of the Republic of Puerto Rico) and their tenure at the university would be guaranteed.

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Two days later, President Roth, flanked by the Dean of the Mayaguez Campus of the University of Puerto Rico and by the two academics, announced in a press conference the revolutionary invention. Patent registrations had already been filed and approved in the United States, Germany, England and Japan. The patents would credit the inventors and would become property of a new organization, the Caribbean Center for Technology, based in the grounds of the campus. The purpose of the CCT was to help student scientists pursue inventions and technologies that would help launch a technological renaissance in the island nation. Exclusive patents generated under its supervision would fund the CCT. The battery design was licensed to Apple, Dell and IBM for immediate implementation into their mobile computer models. Preliminary tests showed that using the new technology would yield laptop computer batteries a tenth of the size of the current generation, while at the same time being able to hold a charge twice as large.

Representatives of the major car industries did not hesitate to inquire on the availability of the battery design for automotive applications. The CTT (under mandate by President Roth) answered that yes, the design was available as long as a fraction of the vehicles were assembled in Puerto Rico. President Roth had instructed the CTT to hint that such a move would easily be followed by some kind of tax incentive for the construction and operation of the car factories.

Daimler Chrysler had been toying for a long time with a concept car they internally referred to as the "Third Country car." It was made out of injected plastic and the chassis was a composite honeycomb assembly that was much stronger, lighter and cheaper than a conventional steel unibody. The only problem they had was that the cost advantages of the chassis and bodywork got shot to hell with the inclusion of the engine, which had to be very energy efficient, light and cheap. Their market studies told them that if they could manage to produce a car that could be sold for \$3000 or less (once the production lines were optimized), they could easily setup factories in China and India and sell a ton of them.

Except that they did not have a power source. An electrical power package would have been very nice, but the batteries used for the current generation of electrical or hybrid cars would cost too damn much and would be too heavy for the car.

That is, until the battery patents were announced. If the battery was of a negligible weight, then maybe they could opt for bigger electric engines and the gear needed to charge the battery quickly. A delegation from Daimler Benz visited the CCT and shared their plans with the engineers. After a quick call the delegation was invited to visit the White House in the Old San Juan island fortress.

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The German-American delegation was shocked. They had expected to maybe take a good look at the technology, hopefully even see some engineering mules in action. But in two days they had in their hands a preliminary agreement to replace the aging San Juan metropolitan bus fleet (the “AMA” buses, for Autoridad Metropolitana de Autobuses, operated by the government) with newer buses that used the same construction as the third world car, and with the batteries designed in Mayaguez. The leader of the Daimler Chrysler group silently cursed himself for not thinking ahead of the trip. They could have easily sold them into more ideas, but the bus factory had merit: they would get rid of their stinking diesel buses, and the new ones would be much nicer and cheaper. In addition, they could sell the excess production capacity to other countries in the Caribbean, and once production kinks were smoothed out they would even consider selling some in the United States.

President Roth, as hinted, promised a special tax exemption for the bus factories (which would be located in the south of the island to help with the unemployment situation there) and also told them that if things went well they would be very interested in building the “third world car.”

President Roth did not want to flood the island with \$3,000 cars. The island was already too crowded (there were 1.8 cars per person) so in order to introduce these cheaper cars he would have to create an incentive for people to ditch their gas-guzzlers. Lower demand in gas also meant more oil that he could sell to other countries. Also, if the oil deposits dried-up prematurely, it would be life or death to make sure that the island did not rely on oil as much as it did back in the commonwealth years.

The recharging of the batteries could have been an issue, but CCT had promised him a 1-hour battery supercharger within 3 months. He also had

to consider using a special adapter for the cars, and allowing car owners a recharging outlet in their homes that bypassed the electrical meter. That meant free electricity if you purchased an electrical car. It would be expensive, but with the newer generation of oil-firing thermo-electrical centrals the pollution from the added demand for electricity would be much lower than the pollution from so many million cars, most of them poorly maintained.

Chapter 17

Guaynabo

Republic of Puerto Rico

Now with less than a year from the second presidential elections, President Roth resigned himself to not get much done until the campaign could be sorted out. He had good strategists, and his Chief of Staff, even if he started with his left feet, was not too bad. The only thing he needed was for the opposition party to get their acts together and run the primaries. His own party did not run primaries since nobody bothered to challenge his candidacy.

The day before the deadline for candidate and new party registrations, elements of a then-unknown terrorist organization tried to attack the Cerro Maravilla (Marvel Hill) telecommunications center, where over 20 years earlier it was the site of a massacre that evolved into the worst political cover-up in the history of the island.

The terrorists struck on the anniversary of the massacre.

It was not a closely guarded secret that after President Roth won the Presidential elections three years earlier, he had ordered a full review of all strategic infrastructure assets. Cerro Maravilla had always been in a shit list because of the massacre, so he quietly ordered to have its functions moved to alternate locations, and to leave the building powered and the antennas intact.

Roth knew it was a matter of time before some idiots decided to blow up the Cerro Maravilla station just to try to grab attention. He was amazed it had not happened before but he knew it was just too damn tempting to pass.

Cerro Maravilla was in an isolated area and only had one access road, so it was easy for the police to hide movement sensors and install cameras out in the wood line. Roth was tempted to push the chief of Police to setup guard posts, but the facility had no real use, so in the end he let the chief run with his idea.

The cameras worked on both the normal visible light and infrared bands, and the attack was broadcast live to the security office of the facility that replaced Cerro Maravilla less than a year earlier. The police already had an emergency response drill in place, so when the call was placed they simply jumped into their Chevy Suburbans and barreled down the road, a mere 3 miles away from the attack. A police helicopter was dispatched to the scene and the air space 25 miles around the mountain was closed to civilian traffic.

The cops also had installed reverse spikes on the road that led to Cerro Maravilla. These, concealed under a metal plate that ran across the width of the road, could be activated remotely. Once activated, two hundred metal spikes would pop-up, facing in the direction of Cerro Maravilla (there were two sets, the second would point away from Cerro Maravilla if needed). Any vehicle driving in the direction of the station would be able to drive safely over the spikes, but anyone trying to drive in the opposite direction would get all its tires slashed by the spikes.

The plan was to let the terrorists destroy the communications central and catch them on their way down the mountain road (driving off road was absolutely out of the question, they had no choice but to drive). They were hoping that the terrorists would deplete their ammunition before they realized it was a trap.

The police helicopter would be carrying news cameramen from the two major local TV networks. The chief of police had started a collaboration project with the news crews to allow the people of the country to see the police in action from an impartial source. Had he elected to send policemen with cameras people would complain that they would only show things that made the police look good.

The attack went as planned: The attackers drove up the mountain in two old Jeeps, with metal pipes welded to the front bumpers (as improvised brush guards), which they used to run over the fence. They did not know the cops had taken down all the reinforcing cables from the fence, and they were too stupid to realize it had been too easy to run over it. Had the anchor cables not been removed, the Jeeps would have bounced off the cyclone fence.

Once inside the perimeter, the men and women in the first Jeep took

positions along the front of the facility, spraying the front of the building with Colt AR-15s (stolen from a police arms locker five years earlier) and an AK-47 assault rifle (from an old arms cache originally set up by the nationalists more than twenty years ago).

The four men in the second Jeep walked around the main building, carrying satchel bags with blocks of Semtex plastic explosives, but not the detonators (as a safety measure, one of the riflemen carried the blasting caps and the detonators). Once the blocks of Semtex were placed in the three communications towers (two for TV, one for microwave links) the sappers walked back to the front of the facility to retrieve the blasting caps and detonators.

Once the blast charges were in place and they had emptied their magazine clips, the attackers jumped back into their Jeeps and drove 100 meters back up the road. When they tried to detonate the charges, only one of the towers (the one used for microwave) collapsed. Cursing their bad luck, the attackers turned the Jeeps around and started to drive down the mountain road. They wanted to drive back up and check the charges, but their team leader would not have any of it; they had spent too much time up in the mountain and the explosions would have been noticed far enough that somebody may had called the pigs already.

They were taking a tight blind turn when both Jeeps at the same time shuddered violently, and all eight attackers at the same time realized that the sickening bang they had just heard came from their tires being shredded to pieces. As soon as the two Jeeps skidded to a halt, a police helicopter came out of nowhere and hovered above.

All eight terrorists looked up and instinctively aimed their rifles and pulled the trigger, but they had emptied all their clips into the service buildings, so they were out of bullets. Sirens howled and two shiny black Chevy Suburbans sped towards them, with blue lights installed under their sun visors. The pigs were there.

Their collective reaction was that they were about to replay the Cerro Maravilla massacre of July 25, 1978. The pigs were going to shoot them in cold blood with no witnesses and there was not a damn thing they could do about it.

The last thing in the minds of the policemen was the original massacre. Most of the policemen were too young to even remember the televised hearings that propelled the (if short) political career of a then unknown assistant District Attorney named Hector Rivera Cruz. What they knew is that the Chief of Police had promised, not, guaranteed, that any policeman found to

have shot even one bullet that was uncalled for would find himself walking the midnight beat at the Hato Rey housing projects for the next 15 years.

This, plus having the cameramen in the helicopter (who were broadcasting live to channels 2 and 4) helped temper the policemen. Every weapon had its safety on, and nobody dared to even put a finger inside of the trigger guard.

The helicopter's loudspeaker came to life, instructing the occupants of the two disabled Jeeps to slowly exit the vehicles and to leave their weapons in the Jeeps.

The attackers, not really having any other choice, complied. They slowly raised their hands and lined themselves in front of the two police vehicles.

The police helicopter (from the elite Fuerzas Unidas de Rápida Acción, or FURA) turned behind the Jeeps and dropped rappelling lines, and a second later four policemen in full SWAT gear rappelled down and started checking the Jeeps. The four policemen then walked behind the row of terrorists and instructed them to put their hands over their heads and kneel over.

The full operation was being broadcast live to the country, and CNN had picked up the feed that was being sent to Telemundo affiliates in New York City and elsewhere. The Puerto Ricans were playing to an audience.

Slowly each terrorist was cuffed and frisked. By then the airspace restriction had been lifted and three additional helicopters, all from news outlets, were hovering above. The terrorists were cuffed to the bumpers of the Suburbans and about an hour later were driven out of the mountain, one at a time. It would be the last time they would be allowed to contact each other until their trials would begin.

Accusations of a setup started almost from the moment the terrorists stepped out of their Jeeps with their hands raised above their heads.

The Justice Department was not worried at all. These people had driven up a deserted road, ran over a fence and trespassed into government property. They then proceeded to shred to pieces two small buildings full of expensive telecommunications gear (which was useless, but that was irrelevant) by means of illegally owned firearms, a handful of which were stolen from the police department. Not happy with destroying the two small buildings and riddling the bigger building with hundreds of bullets, but they also tried to blow up the three communication towers, succeeding in destroying one. These "victims" were then arrested without having to fire a single shot, the only material loss being 8 Jeep tires at a cost of \$65 apiece.

Overall it was a great coup for the Police and Justice departments. Not

even Johnny Cochran could possibly get these terrorists off the hook.

Chapter 18

Ponce District Courthouse

Republic of Puerto Rico

Eight identical (armored) police vans transported the accused terrorists from the holding facility in the outskirts of Ponce to the District Courthouse. Two police motorcycles led each of the eight vans, and each had either one or two chase cars bringing the rear. As each mini-caravan left the holding facility (located in the grounds of the Ponce Regional Prison) it took a different route back to the town.

Two police helicopters hovered over the airspace between the holding facilities and downtown Ponce, and the airport pattern for the Ponce airport had been modified make sure that air corridor was empty during the transit.

Everybody in Puerto Rico was glued to a television set. Ponce's chief of police made it clear it was not a good idea for people to crowd the streets around the regional courthouse, not that it would matter since most of these streets would be barricaded and only the press would be allowed through. Even the press had restrictions. For example, TV trucks would not be allowed to park close to the courthouse. Instead, the Department of Justice had leased television trucks through which all signals would be routed, where more cables would transfer them past the barricade line. Employees from the two main TV stations staffed the TV trucks provided by the Justice Department, and a CNN crew would direct the broadcasts. The feeds for all the cameras in the courthouse would be sent uninterrupted to the barricade line, where they would be split to the TV trucks of all the press present (this made

sure everybody had the same feed). To make sure there would be no accusations of censorship, the main TV truck by the courthouse was explicitly off-limits to any employee of the Puerto Rican government except in a case of extreme emergency.

Almost in a coordinated fashion, the eight armored vans crossed inside of the barricaded perimeter and lined up at the entrance to the ramp that led to the basement garage, where it was customary to offload prisoners. Millions of eyes squinted at their televisions, trying to see even a peek into the vans, since no photos of the accused men and women had been published. Millions squinted again when there was a sudden flash and the TV signal was lost.

President Roth was watching the arrival of the prisoners on TV just like every other citizen. He had a pretty goddamn good idea of what happened, but right now there was nothing he could do but pray that his people could handle it.

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The scene in front of the courthouse was right out of a hellish nightmare. The leased TV control vans had blown up; their combined explosive force flattened the eight armored vans against the perimeter wall, crushing everybody inside. The police motorcycles were sent off flying by the shock wave, three of their police riders were killed instantly: the others suffered fractures and concussions. The chase cars had the best luck, they got pushed against the perimeter wall and all their windows shattered.

The K-9 unit's had checked the whole District Courthouse building, including the surrounding area, the TV truck and even the police cars parked in the area. There was of course a weak spot: the K-9 crew and the dogs. It would take 5 hours before the murdered K-9 crew and their dogs would be found stashed into a dumpster a quarter mile away. The people that planted the bomb performed the check of the building, perimeters and TV trucks.

Ponce's Chief of Police cursed his goddamn luck. In what he would see later as a very inspired moment, he ordered the barricades lifted so the emergency rescue vehicles would not need to slow down, and then left instructions that the press was to operate without any obstruction whatsoever. He was counting on being able to subpoena copies of all their tapes so they could be used as evidence.

President Roth had the same idea; he called his Chief of Police to pass the word that the press must be allowed to roam at their leisure as long as they did not get in the way of the emergency crew. He was pleased when the Chief replied that it had been taken care of. Right then decided that

Ponce's Chief of Police would be at the head of the next promotion list and instructed (unnecessarily, since he had come to the same conclusion) the Chief of Police to do so.

Within 15 minutes the phone rang again; the American ambassador relayed to President Roth that the FBI was ready to fly ASAP their anti-terrorism reaction team, and that all the resources available to the US Law Enforcement community were at his disposal for the asking. Roth thanked them for the offer and replied the Republic would be grateful if the FBI could let him borrow the anti-terrorism team (Puerto Rico was already a member of Interpol, so in theory he already had the cooperation of the Americans in case they needed to search for finger print matches). The ambassador replied that his government would comply immediately.

Roth thought about the implications of the attack. It was now officially a conspiracy, since the organizers of the attack had done the smart thing: they killed their killers before they could talk. Roth conceded that was the right way to do it, just like with Oswald (if he had really done it, which Roth doubted). Again President Roth found himself with nothing to do.

Chapter 19

The White House

Washington, D.C.

As the elections came closer, the President of the United States had no choice but to switch his focus to the one thing that mattered: politics. The Puerto Rican dilemma was far from solved, and it did not matter what kind of obstacles he threw in their way, they overcame it admirably. The Cerro Maravilla attack was a fuckup from the moment they came up with the idea. Billions spent on CIA every goddamn year and nobody had bothered to check if there had been unusual activity in the area.

The original plan (only a handful of people knew) was to setup the attack on Cerro Maravilla and force a confrontation. If he got lucky, the attackers would be murdered the same way it had happened in 1978 and he could figure out to push the Puerto Rican President into a cover-up fiasco.

The problem is that son of a bitch Roth had eyes in the back of his head. On his desk was a report from the FBI team sent to the island to help on the courthouse bombing. The report had confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that the police had expected the attack. The rules of engagement explicitly forbid the police from even switching off the safety of their weapons until after the attackers directly shot at them. Of course, none of this had happened; the morons spent all their ammo on the buildings, and when they made it to the roadblock their weapons were useless.

The trick of splitting the prisoners and to transport them separately was also by the book; no different from the way it would have been done in the

states.

The whole mess in the courthouse could not be avoided. The moment these assholes started talking it would be a matter of days before the Puerto Ricans figured out the conspiracy started here in Washington. He desperately hoped that the explosions wiped off whatever physical evidence the eight men and women carried on their clothes and bodies.

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For many decades generations of Puerto Ricans that had served in the American armed forces had complained of the way the line units were assigned as to put minorities in the areas of greater danger. While the armed services tried to fix this situation over the years, it was far from perfect. One of the places where it lacked was in the way that National Guard and Reserve units were assigned throughout the states, Puerto Rico and other possessions.

It did not take a genius to figure out that every single National Guard and Reserve unit in Puerto Rico specialized in one kind of military specialty or another that would make these units critical to any major deployment overseas. This was of course a terrible thing for the locals that made up these reserves, but it also came with an interesting tradeoff: all of these reserve units in the island were trained in very useful specialties.

For example, the only graves registration company in all the US Army was based in Puerto Rico. When Puerto Rico became a Republic all of these reserve units were disbanded and the Americans had to hire these former soldiers so they could train the unit that replaced them. That unit was based in Alabama (Southern folks complain about the same thing: the Yankees always make sure that Southern Boys and Girls are put in the line of fire first).

These graves registration specialists were trained to perform a myriad of services, including autopsies, embalming and a few even knew how to use a DNA sequencer. Since the Army had been collecting DNA samples for over 15 years, using an automated DNA sequencer was more effective when dealing with mass casualties.

The former commander of the graves registration company was very familiar with death. Not only was he a veteran of the first two Gulf Wars, but also he had been a Medical Examiner for the San Juan Metropolitan area for the last 15 years. The police called him Dr. Death out of respect for his uncanny ability to seek answers from the dead.

Dr. Death had seen the bombing of the courthouse. He was a humble man and not prone to bragging, but that did not stop him from knowing that

he would be leading this case.

Once the injured were evacuated and the forensics team had finished taking photos and videos (plus grabbing copies of every news tape made from within the security perimeter), the bodies of the eight accused and the police escorts were transported to the University of Puerto Rico's School of Medicine in Rio Piedras, where the Forensics Institute was located.

The CCT had dispatched chemical, civil and mechanical engineering professors and students to study the damage of the explosion. Less than 24 hours later they had preliminary findings on the explosives used and their precise location. DNA evidence had been lifted from the murdered K-9 team and drug-sniffing dogs.

The autopsy was considered a waste of time but it had to be done; a crime had been committed and every clue was important. Doctor Death set shop in a restricted section of the Forensics Institute usually reserved for high-profile cases. He of course knew the cause of death, but he wanted to remove from their clothing and bodies whatever traces of fiber and pollen he could. In the past murder cases had been solved because a trace of pollen or carpet fiber tied a subject to a specific area.

During the skin examination, Doctor Death noted (he actually had a small cassette recorder hooked to his belt, with a lapel microphone clipped to his apron) that all eight suspects had tattoos. Tattoo parlors are not common in the island, so most of the people with tattoos either got them in the states (usually in connection with military service) or they got them in jail.

The tattoos in all eight of them (even the two women) were definitely not of the prison variety; they were just too well done. And he could recognize at least half of these to be unit crests of US Army units. Doctor Death did not find that to be weird, these people had to learn how to shoot and blow things up somewhere.

Before he started the examination of the internal organs, he had a sudden revelation. He decided to call the Chief of Police to tell him to not submit the DNA samples (after sequencing was completed) directly to the FBI. Since he still kept contact with his former soldiers from the graves registration unit, he knew of two of his soldiers that knew a way to tap into the Army system that held the DNA samples of all soldiers in service for the last 15 years.

The Chief told him he would consult with the President, but to keep working and assume the samples would not be handed to the FBI.

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President Roth had not been pleased with having to allow the FBI team to

participate in the investigation. Had he know he had people in the island that could quietly search these DNA archives; he would have politely turned them down. If it was just to look up fingerprints then he could rely on Interpol.

Doctor Death's hunch disturbed him. He always expected the Americans to meddle here and there, but to go as far as trying to trigger a second Cerro Maravilla was criminally stupid on their part. Roth called back the chief of Police and ordered a surveillance team on the FBI people for as long as they were in the island. He also authorized the withholding of the DNA evidence from the FBI people.

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The FBI team consisted of a special agent and three technicians. They were staying at the Caribe Hilton in the tourist district of San Juan, and were moving around in a Chevy Suburban provided by the Police. The Police department had offered one of their brightest young detectives to act as liaison, but they were politely turned down. The Suburban had the additional Kevlar armoring that was now required equipment for all police vehicles, and it had a standard police radio.

Tapping their hotel phones was trivial; the phone system of the hotel had been modified years ago to allow law enforcement agencies to do so without problems.

The Suburban was returned to the motor pool at the end of each day, when it was fueled and serviced. The Suburban stayed overnight at the motor pool and was driven to the basement garage of the hotel every day at 5:50 AM (the FBI men were early birds). Again, it was not a problem to bug the Suburban, since it was under police custody during the night.

It only took a day to figure out something was not right. None of the FBI men, all supposedly married, used their hotel phones. All their communications were done with cell phones, which of course could not be monitored. After a long stream of profanities, the lead technician in charge of setting up the monitoring had a sudden revelation: they could not tap digital cell phones, but they could do so if the phones were analog. And all digital cell phones switch to analog mode if digital service is not allowed.

A quick call to the police headquarters in Hato Rey and they got permission to call the phone company and have them switch off digital service in the three-block area around the hotel. From now on they would be able to listen to their cell phone calls as long as they were not encrypted.

The surveillance team wanted chase cars, but there was no need to do it since when the bugs were installed in the Suburban they also added a GPS

tracker, of the kind used by car rental companies to track their cars. Having this satellite-based tracking allowed them to follow the FBI men without being overtly conspicuous about it.

Chapter 20

The White House, San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

President Roth and his cabinet had finished reviewing the police report on the activities of the four FBI men that were supposedly helping the Puerto Ricans with the bombing investigation. They all agreed with the Secretary of Justice in that they had more than enough evidence to arrest these men and charge them with espionage and obstruction of justice.

Little by little information had trickled down to the island that kept pointing fingers at the US as the source of the original attack on Cerro Maravilla and the following bombing in front of the courthouse. It was ironic that a nation that just a few years before championed their war against terrorism would now elect to use the same tactics. Worse, they did not understand why the Americans were doing it. It was politically stupid, and Puerto Rico had no military significance to the Americans (if it did, then why the hell did they allow the referendum?).

Unless either the President of the United States was insane, or he had let himself be manipulated by unknown parties, the truth of the matter was that know the who was not enough. They had to figure out the why.

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After four years of putting up with White House Communications Agency (WHCA, pronounced “WACKA”), the sergeant decided enough was enough. He had already been denied a chance to attend the basic noncommissioned officers course (BNCOC, pronounced “Beenock”) at Fort Gordon Georgia.

Twice.

Sergeant Ramiro Velez had finished a college degree in night school, and he always maxed out his physical fitness (PT) tests, but because he was a Puerto Rican he was being treated like a pariah. The only reason they did not strip him off his security clearance and shipped him to a rifle company was that there was nobody else available to fill his billet.

Sergeant Velez had kept an eye on the developments in Puerto Rico, and he had been pretty goddamn tempted to take advantage of the MRA when it was enacted but he had postponed it because back then he was still trying to finish his college degree. But now was different: he was done and there was nothing, except his uniform, that tied him to the states.

Working in WHCA gave him access to the entire communications infrastructure in the White House. Because he was in the First Sergeant's shit list, he drew all the shit details. He got stuck with the most tedious jobs, like doing backups of the tapes that record conversations in every office of the White House, including the president's. Or backups of the servers that handled the bulk of the message traffic destined for the White House.

Sergeant Velez methodically made extra copies of every tape and removable hard disk he worked on. The tapes were plastic, so it was easy to take them past the metal detectors, especially since the cassettes were the exact format as the ones in his mini digital tape recorder. The hard disk packs were a problem, but then he realized all of their servers had firewire connections; all he had to do was connect his Apple iPod portable music player to each server and copy whatever files he wanted. His iPod was already registered with security, so he could take it through security checkpoints without questions asked.

The Sergeant kept doing this for almost two months. He was waiting for the perfect opportunity to just disappear. When he saw the Cerro Maravilla attack arrests on CNN, and then the courthouse bombing, he prepared to bail out within the next month.

Up until that time he had not bothered to check the material he had been removing from WHCA. Once he saw the mess in the news, he decided it was time to take a look at them.

Fifteen hours later, cursing his goddamn curiosity, Sergeant Velez realized he was in deep shit. He had to leave Washington immediately.

There was no way in hell he could pass customs with the files. They would check his bags and his laptop. His solution was so simple that it bothered him not having tried it before.

Sergeant Velez was an amateur computer programmer. He was actually pretty good at it, and originally had hoped to land a job doing just that once he was out of the Army. The Sergeant spent the next three hours writing scripts that would automate the conversion of all the data he stole from the White House. The files would be converted to plain text, and then encrypted using a free program based on the popular “Pretty Good Privacy” (PGP) encryption program. PGP was unbreakable, not even the American NSA could crack PGP unless they were willing to spend weeks at a time on one of their multi-million dollar supercomputers.

Just to crack one message.

The Sergeant’s script would finally take these files and post them to random web pages, Usenet newsgroups, Internet-based message boards and finally as spam emails.

By making sure there were millions of copies of his messages, he made it pretty much impossible to lose even one. He would fly to Puerto Rico with clothes for a week, his Apple laptop and his iPod. His laptop would be completely clean of suspicious data (even the encryption keys were saved in an internet server) and the iPod only held purchased music in case the feds tried to use pirated music as a bullshit charge to arrest him.

Once done transmitting the messages he bought a coach ticket to San Juan. Lucky him, he actually found a straight flight, he was afraid he would be forced to connect in Atlanta or Miami. He bought the ticket online and printed an electronic boarding pass, which was now the norm for business travelers and would (hopefully) allow him to blend-in. He paid for the ticket with a yet unused credit card he managed to get issued using his mother’s maiden name.

Sergeant Velez lived in Arlington, so he was only a 15-minute drive from National Airport. At the last second he decided to drive ten miles away to the Vienna Metro station and ditch the car there, then buy a paper fare card instead of using his normal plastic smart card (which he damn well knew was being used to track people’s movements around DC).

Even if the Vienna and Reagan National Metro stations were barely 10 miles apart as the crow flies, the way the rail network is setup the Sergeant would have to ride the Metro for almost 40 minutes and would have to change trains once, in Rosslyn. Once he was in Rosslyn he realized he had done a goddamn stupid thing, because he would be riding through the Arlington National Cemetery and Pentagon Metro stations, and somebody was bound to recognize him.

It was too late to improvise, so he just resigned himself to what could happen.

Chapter 21

Joe's Place

Vienna, Virginia

Anyone that has lived in the DC suburbs in Maryland and Virginia will readily tell you that most restaurants in the area are mediocre. Most of these are chain-owned or franchised, and there are very few distinct places to have good food. If you want good food, you have two choices: you can either shell out hundreds and go to a fancy place and hope their chef is worth shit, or you can ask around and see if the locals will trust you enough to share with you their favorite hole-in-the-wall places (these are defended like if they were national security secrets).

Everybody that knows about food in North Virginia knows there is only one good Italian restaurant that serves good inexpensive (as compared to cheap) food: Joe's Place in the corner of Nutley Street and route 123 in Vienna. Joe actually owns a handful of these restaurants, but don't be fooled; while there are a few restaurants with the "Joe's Place" sign, there is only one of these restaurants where "Joe" hangs out, and that is the one in Vienna.

This restaurant is the best-kept food secret in the whole city. The food is great, and during the buffet hours it is so busy that it is the perfect place to have an anonymous meeting. There is no way in hell that the waiters will remember your face unless you are a regular, in which case Joe, his kids and the waiters will be able to recall from memory the last 12 things you have ordered at their restaurant.

This degree of hectic anonymity made it a great spot for government

officials to “leak” information to the press. The freelance writer had been chasing blind leads on the current administration, and he was getting fed up. If he could not come up with something solid in the next week he had no choice but drop the story and move on to something else. He had journalistic ideals like the best of the field, but he also had to pay his bills. The time he was wasting on the wild goose chase could easily be spent ghostwriting and writing trade magazine articles. These paid handsomely but did not carry the satisfaction of investigative journalism.

His “source” was goddamn late, and he was already on his third bowl of minestrone soup (which as usual was absolutely delicious). He really wanted to relief himself, but was afraid that the source would chicken out when he could not find it.

He decided to hell with it, he was going to take a leak. When he walked out of the bathroom he saw his source was just walking into the restaurant.

The two did not waste time in pleasantries. As usual, the source refused payment for his information, and he did not have an agenda. The only reason he was cooperating was out of idealism; he was sick and tired of what was happening in the administration.

The journalist liked the source because he was not interested in James Bond antics. He simply pulled a manila envelope from his leather briefcase and handed it over to the journalist. No explanation would be needed. The source snatched a bit of Italian bread from the fresh basket just placed by Joe himself (he wanted to take a better look at them, he thought the skinny guy was a regular) and then left the journalist to figure out what the hell to do with the envelope.

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Not even the sound of the wheels touching down in the Isla Verde airport made Sergeant Velez feel relieved. The whole trip, from the moment he walked across the security checkpoint, was an exercise in controlled terror. He had been awake for over a day and was starting to see things. Every time he fell asleep in the plane he had nightmares of American jet fighters ordering the plane back to Washington.

Then paranoia kicked-in. The airplane probably carried a couple Air Marshals, so he stood a good chance of being arrested and kept in the plane.

Once he was in Isla Verde he felt like getting on his knees like Pope John Paul II and kissing the ground. He resisted the urge and walked to through the baggage claims area (he had not checked his only piece of baggage) where he hung out until the baggage for his flight was dumped on the

carousel. Once he had seen a half dozen people pick their bags, he followed them outside.

He could rent a car, but that was a waste of time: the second he turned over his knowledge to the government, he would be taken to a secure location. It would be a long time before he drove again.

It was then that he noticed the Puerto Rican Police officer holding the sign that read "MRA arrivals." He quickly walked over to the policeman, who was delighted to meet him. The policeman explained that the President had just announcing the first recruiting drive for the soon-to-be-established Army of Puerto Rico. All MRA arrivals were to report to the Army recruitment headquarters in Fort Buchanan. A bus was making regular runs, and MRA candidates that signed a letter establishing their intent to enlist in the Puerto Rican Army would receive free hotel accommodations and one meal a day courtesy of the Puerto Rican Army.

Not knowing what the hell else to do, former US Army Sergeant Velez walked over to the bus station to wait for the next trip to Fort Buchanan.

Chapter 22

Fort Buchanan

Republic of Puerto Rico

Fort Buchanan was originally intended as service base for US Armed Forces operations in the island. Except for the exchange and commissaries required by law for the use of the big retiree population in the island, most of the activities in the base were related to support of some active units for the US Navy and Marines, plus support for the network of recruiters of the US Army and Navy (the network of US Air Force recruiters consisted of two lowly sergeants that were stuck driving from school to school).

Ramiro remembered the whole process like it was yesterday, but it had been more than six years. He was walking into the US Post Office in Mayaguez to take the US Civil Service Test, hoping to land a job as a postman or something like that. He walked into the wrong room and found himself interrupting the Armed Services Vocational Aptitudes Battery Test (ASVAB), the holy writ of the Armed Forces recruiting process. Nailing the ASVAB was the ticket to get assigned to a cushy high tech job, qualification for extended educational benefits and even enlistment bonuses. The shortest soldier he had seen in his life was administering the test. The soldier, a staff sergeant with 12 years of service, was at least a foot shorter than him. They talked for a few minutes and the recruiter invited him to visit the recruitment station at Mayaguez Mall so they could talk about it, no strings attached.

When two days later he went to the recruiting station, he made a wrong turn and found himself at the Navy recruiting station instead. The Navy

recruiter asked him what was his college major. When he replied “engineering” the recruiter’s eyes lit up and he spent the next 15 minutes struggling to convince him the US Army was a goddamn waste of time for an engineer like him. Engineers belonged in the Navy.

The Navy recruiter could have spent another half an hour with his fuck-the-Army speech (he practiced it every day, recruiting was a cutthroat business) but the staff sergeant walked in, pulled him back to his office and then yelled (across the thin walls) that it would be a cold day in hell before he let the Navy steal one more of his recruits.

He had nothing to do, and the Army recruiter did not feed him the usual bullshit. He agreed to take the test for the next sitting, two days away.

A week later, the recruiter had called him and he sounded excited. He offered to buy him lunch so they could discuss the results of his test. He was wary about it, but not having a thing to lose, plus the free lunch, he decided to go for it. The recruiter explained that there was an unwritten rule for recruits of Puerto Rican descent: A Puerto Rican candidate that scored 50% or better was the same as an American candidate that scored twice as much. The reason was because the Puerto Rican candidates had a handicap: they were taking the test in their second language.

He had scored 100% on the American scale. That is, he nailed it. A recruit that scored 50% or better in Puerto Rico was classified as an “alpha” recruit, and counted for double sales quota points (the legend that recruiters got a bonus based on recruits was pure bullshit).

Two days later, the recruiter picked him up at 4:30 AM at his apartment in Paris Street. This time he was driving a Chevy Astro and there were four other guys about to ship out to Army basic training.

They drove in silence and stopped at the only 7-11 shop in the island to grab a bite before going to the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) just outside the main gate at Fort Buchanan. MEPS was designed as an assembly line: recruit candidates would move from station to station, and if they got a passing grade they would move on to the next. The last two stations before the recruit candidates would be allowed to talk to a career counselor (who would offer them a choice of military specialty based on manpower predictions, ASVAB scores and prior education) were medical/psychological and security.

The medical and psychological checks were obvious; the Armed Forces were interested in recruiting only young and healthy men and women. Also, they would not recruit people that had a potential to spend a great amount

of money in dental repairs. The psychological check was designed to trigger reactions that could foretell potential psychological issues.

The security station was a preliminary check into the background of each candidate. The background check had different depths depending on the potential military occupation for the candidate. As a norm, “alpha” recruits were subjected to a Top Secret, Special Background investigation, which would take the FBI at least 5 months.

Once Ramiro had gone through the whole process, he met with his career adviser, who offered him the choice between airborne infantry (always offered regardless of qualifications), data entry specialist and ordinance specialist. He said no.

The career specialist shit a brick. The insults started from ungrateful shit and culminated in insinuations of the sexual reputation of his mother. He explained he was not trying to be a smartass. He was not going to waste an engineering education on infantry duty. A data entry specialist is a typist that works in front of a computer terminal, and ordinance people are fucking shopkeepers.

The career advisor had to admit the college boy was right. He sent him back to the lounge to chill out while he figured out what the hell to do with him.

Ramiro went back as instructed and played dominoes with the other three recruits still at MEPS. After 45 minutes he was called back. The career advisor gave him two options, he could take a job as a telecommunications specialist, or he could ship out to an infantry company. He took the telecommunications job.

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Ramiro snapped out of his daydream when he figured out the bus was taking him straight to the fucking MEPS. It made sense; the facility was perfect for pushing an inhuman amount of paperwork in a very small time.

When he got off the bus he noticed that nothing had changed since he had gone through the enlistment process. Even the signs were still in English. Ramiro was greeted by another policeman, who asked if by any chance he had a copy of his 201 file (a card that tracks down the career of a soldier, like assignments, awards, etc.) and his DD 214 form (discharge papers).

He explained that yes, he had a fresh copy of the 201 file, but no DD 214. The policeman made a copy of the 201 file and handed back the original to him.

After a ten-minute wait, a man in a uniform he had never seen came to see

him. The uniform was almost the same as his green class “B” uniform (light green short sleeve shirt, dark green pants and black shoes) but it was khaki. Like with his class “B”, the captain was wearing all his decorations, badges and medals (US Service medals were authorized to be worn with Puerto Rican military uniforms). The former sergeant was of course in civvies, but still stood at attention and saluted.

The captain asked him a few bullshit questions and when the issue of the DD 214 came up, the former sergeant asked for a secure room.

The captain did not know they would be spending the next 12 hours sitting in that room, or that they would drink so much of their lousy coffee that he would have heartburn for a week. He made a mental note to have a secure place setup for defection cases like the one he just had picked up. A sergeant trained in military telecommunications, with a WHCA tour under his belt and carrying enough secrets to warrant him getting the death penalty if the Americans got their paws on him deserved more than cheap coffee and pizza.

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The MEPS station had a debriefing room with a false mirror, but it was not secure so they could not do the full debrief there. It was designed so an investigator would interrogate a recruit while one or two more (one usually a psychologist) watched from behind the mirror. The Marines had a decent interrogation room at Sabana Seca that was secure, so almost at midnight the former sergeant was sneaked out of MEPS in the trunk of the captain’s staff car (a Ford Crown Victoria) and drove him into Fort Buchanan, where he was taken to a helicopter for the ten-minute flight to Saba Seca, an abandoned Navy spy station that President Roth ordered reactivated as soon as the Militia was established.

The former Sabana Seca Naval Security Group in Sabana Seca was a flat parcel about 20 miles west of San Juan. It was surrounded by a rundown neighborhood riddled with crime until President Roth’s urban renovation initiatives struck the area. Now everything within 5 miles of the base had been rebuilt and looked pretty nice. The criminals resisted initially, but a few overnight combined raids of police and militia took care of that. Sabana Seca was now a model community and was starting to compete with its hated neighbor, Levittown.

The base had a pretty peaceful history: except for a terrorist attack in 1979 that left two dead and many wounded, there were no major security issues with the base up until its closing.

The sergeant was taken to a VIP guesthouse, and a police guard force was left both in the guest house and in the perimeter.

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When Ramiro woke up he was shaken. It was almost 11:30 AM. He knew he had been exhausted, he had barely slept in the plane, and the interrogation at MEPS took forever. Still, he did not expect to drop like a rock for almost 14 hours.

The last thing he remembered from last night was that they took him to the VIP guesthouse. His room was pretty nice and had its own bathroom. Somebody had unpacked his things, and his toilet kit was in the bathroom. He took a long shower and tried to make himself presentable.

Before he got out of the room he noticed that there was a small desk, and on the wall what looked like a computer network jack. The sergeant unpacked his laptop and tried to see if the jack would allow him access to the Internet or if it was restricted in any way (it wasn't).

Before he tried to download his encrypted messages, he tested the Internet connection to make sure it would be fast enough. Once satisfied, he proceeded to download everything he had stolen from the White House.

Right as he was preparing to burn compact discs with all the data, somebody knocked on his door and the captain from the previous day walked-in. The captain interrupted when he tried to explain that he was downloading the stolen data; they had been monitoring the Internet connection, so they knew what he was doing and there was nothing for him to explain.

By the time he was done burning the discs, the captain came once more to announce breakfast was served. Former US Army Sergeant Ramiro Velez sealed the discs and packed his laptop, and took the bag with him downstairs.

He had visitors.

Sitting in the living room were the President of the Republic of Puerto Rico, his Chief of Staff and a couple people he sort of remembered from his studies at Mayaguez.

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Introductions were made quickly and the President stated that since it was a working brunch, they might as well go attack the food. Ramiro was shocked but he understood why President Roth was there: the things he stole were critical to the wellbeing of the country, so it was only fair to expect the President to feel the need to be involved.

Ramiro could not believe how hungry he was. Even if he was scared shitless, it did not distract him from eating everything they put in front of him.

The two people that were with the President and the Chief of Staff were mathematicians at Mayaguez. He now remembered one of them was a pool hustler and at the time had been experimenting with practical applications of chaos theory to cryptology.

The President informed him that under the provisions of the MRA he would be offered a position in the new Puerto Rican Army. Since he had so much experience as a noncommissioned officer, and he had a college degree, he was prepared to offer him a commission as a Captain in the Puerto Rican Army with date of rank of the day he arrived at the island. The sergeant was not stupid, he knew he had been offered the railroad tracks of a captain because he had achieved an intelligence coup of unbelievable proportions. The whole talk about his time as a sergeant and his college degree was bullshit so the cops would have something to gossip about.

He took the commission. The President shook his hand and welcomed him to the Puerto Rican Army.

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Chapter 23

The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

Everybody in Pentagon operations would forever see the day that Puerto Rico announced the creation of their Army as the day the shit hit the fan. It was not a hostile Army, but it was still a fuckup: if the politicians had their act straight, Puerto Rico would still be a commonwealth and the Navy would still be based off Roosevelt Roads Naval Base.

Of course, this was wishful thinking; the politicians let the Puerto Ricans vote themselves out of the Union. The only people that were sympathetic were the southerners that just would not let go of the fact that the South lost the War of Northern Aggression. To them the Puerto Ricans were lucky bastards that got away, cleanly, with something that the South could not pull off.

Good for the sons of bitches.

The Pentagon was switching gears: All the intelligence-gathering operations were now put in top gear. The Puerto Ricans had an Army and the money to equip and supply it. Nobody knows how the fuck they did it, but they licensed the designs for all their weapons. Not only were they building their stuff cheaper than if they bought it and transported it, but they had designed all their facilities with a built-in excess capacity, so they were also selling stuff to whoever showed up with money.

And their goddamn navy was putting out ships at an incredible rate. They had six cruisers already, and they had started to build destroyers. The god-

damn Israelis were surely behind this, but of course the Americans could not make too much noise about it. The Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) threw a monumental tantrum when he was told about the destroyers. He had witnessed the Atlantic Fleet shrink to almost nothing, and now the goddamn Puerto Ricans were playing imperialistic games. Just the cost of having to divert a carrier group to deal with this frigate navy would be considered in the books as a victory for the Puerto Ricans.

The CNO could almost imagine his Puerto Rican counterpart (trained by us goddamn him!) bragging about it over a beer:

“We got six ships, which we got cheap since we licensed them, and it was enough for them to send after us a full carrier group. I bet they spent a few billions in that deployment!”

The CNO dearly hated having to think in terms of dollars but that was the reality of the situation. Just having to move a carrier group to mess with the Puerto Ricans would screw up the Navy’s budget for the next two years, and they were hurting already because of the mess with the USS Wyoming.

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The US Army planners were not feeling any better. Not only did the Puerto Ricans had raised a trained (by the Americans!) Army in just a couple months, but they could not allow themselves to forget there was also an armed Militia to be dealt with.

The Air Force had verified that most of the Puerto Rican strategic assets were underground, and disruption devices throughout the island rendered all their photo and radar satellites useless. The Army thought this could be avoided just by leaving the Puerto Ricans the hell alone. It was their country; let them do whatever the hell they wanted.

The problem was the President. President Wheeler had a hard-on for the Puerto Ricans.

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The journalist could not believe his good luck: his source had really delivered the goods! Little by little, and by using his source’s material, he had managed to put together a story on how the current presidential administration had systematically tried to undermine the creation of the new republic in Puerto Rico. The Post had already purchased the story, and he had already sold his proposal for the book.

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In Puerto Rico, President Roth and his closest advisers were still trying to digest the implications of the materials that Captain Ramiro Velez, formerly

of the US Army, had brought with him. The Americans had clearly meddled with their affairs.

That was disturbing but it was not what really concerned Roth. The real problem was that the President had done all this for absolutely no strategic reasons. He had acted irrationally, not because of political motives.

The Secretary of Justice pushed the idea that they had enough evidence to raise enough doubts to justify the Americans using their 25th amendment to find the President as unfit for the office. It would be a bitch to prove, and it must not seem to come from the island under any circumstance, but it could be done.

**

The journalist woke up at 2 AM to the buzz of his phone. He was irritated as hell, and it took a lot of will to resist the urge to tell whoever was calling to go fuck himself and call at more reasonable hour. After the quick conversation was over he was very grateful that he did not snap at his caller.

The journalist could not sleep, so he took a scalding hot shower and fixed a pot of coffee. He had until 11:00 AM to prepare for what could be the most important meeting of his career.

His newspaper article was already a final draft, and he was halfway through his first draft for the book. The call gave him independent confirmation of almost everything he had uncovered in the article. He did not need the meeting, but greed took over and now there was nothing that could stop him.

He was instructed to go to the Mongolian Grill in Bethesda, Maryland. A person (no description whatsoever, which scared him to hell) would hand him copies of official White House documents that would corroborate beyond any doubt his accusations. Having one source was useless. Having two was barely acceptable but at least met the newspaper's standards. Having three solid sources was as good as a straight flush.

The journalist took the inner loop of the DC beltway and got off at the Clara Barton parkway, then took Wilson Boulevard into Bethesda. He parked in the municipal garage in the Woodmont Triangle and walked across the street to the small 2-story building that held an ice cream shop, a shoe store and the Mongolian Grill.

The Mongolian Grill was a favorite spot for geeks in the area. For \$5 you could cram a bowl with a great variety of raw ingredients: rice, noodles, onions, chicken, shrimp, eggs, pork and lots of other goodies. Then you

picked from a couple dozen different sauces and a cook took the whole bowl and fried the mix.

The result was similar to Chinese fried rice but it was also sort of a Russian roulette because certain sauces only tasted good with certain ingredients (because of this management posted “cheat sheets” that told amateur customers which sauces matched which ingredients).

For another two bucks you could take as many trips as you wanted. The journalist’s record was four bowls, which only cost him two days worth of Zantac. Because of this he always cringed whenever he found himself entering the establishment, and every time he promised himself this was going to be a one-bowl visit. And every time he broke the promise.

The journalist did not bother looking around; his contact would know what he looks like. He waited his turn in the line and put together a bowl that (if he got lucky) would only require two or three Zantac pills afterward.

He took his drink to a corner table and waited for the food to be delivered. As soon as he had the bowl in front and was about to attack it (he hated how the delicious smell always made him feel like he had not eaten for two weeks) a striking blonde asked him if she could sit down.

The journalist (his mouth was full of noodles) just nodded.

The blonde was absolutely gorgeous. She looked like a Nordic goddess. That is, until she started speaking. It did not take him 30 seconds to place her accent: Spanish Harlem. Back in his youth the journalist spent a few years in New York City and his Puerto Rican girlfriend taught him some Spanish. He called her his “sleeping dictionary,” but only behind her back. If she ever heard him saying that she was bound to slice his nuts while he was asleep.

While he was surprised at her accent, it made sense. Most Americans did not understand that there is no such thing as a Puerto Rican race. Some Puerto Ricans are black, while some are Caucasian and a lot stand somewhere in the middle. And quite a few look like they were transplanted from Norway or Finland.

The blonde had also ordered food, which was delivered just as they were introducing each other. She explained that she was a lobbyist in DC and she was part of the public relations team hired by the government of Puerto Rico. She said they could have figured out a way to dump the information on his lap but then he would have to waste time trying to figure out if there was a hidden agenda.

If he turned down the material, it would be handed over to another reporter. They were willing to continue this until somebody picked up the

story but they were willing to share it with him first since they had already found out about his story and book.

Before he could protest that the story was a secret, she explained that not only were plenty of people at the newspaper sympathetic with the Puerto Rican cause, but also they were terribly offended by what the President and his minions were trying to do to the Puerto Ricans. To add insult to injury she revealed that his book proposal (which he had expected to be confidential) had been emailed to Puerto Rico within the hour.

The journalist had a million questions for the lobbyist, but she put her hands up; she had not been briefed on the whole issue. She had only seen the documents and her instructions to find an aggressive reporter. She dropped a canvas CD case and three dollars crumpled into a ball on the table, then left.

The journalist did not bother finishing his food; he had too much to do, plus he could stand to lose a few pounds.

Chapter 24

The Capitol

San Juan, Republic of Puerto Rico

The full caucuses of the two houses were in full session for an emergency presidential address. Only a few select members of the cabinet and the defense committees were privy to the facts.

Of course, everybody damn well knew what the hell was going on, especially since all three local papers had reprinted the Washington Post's article on the illegal war-like American interventions against Puerto Rico. To this was added continuous coverage by CNN and all the other networks. CNN's talking heads were predicting that it was only a matter of hours before impeachment proceedings would begin.

The purpose of the presidential address was to make the accusations official. In a long and passionate speech, which took three writers almost two days to write and polish, President Roth exposed the imperialistic abuses of the Americans.

The Americans had inserted spy submarines into Puerto Rican waters. They had paid for terrorists to bomb a telecommunications station that was also literally a shrine for the pro-independence movement. Then, when the terrorists were arrested, they paid to have them killed with car bombs that also killed and wounded a handful of policemen and court officers. Thankfully no civilians had been hurt.

The Americans also were trying to use spy satellites and surveillance aircraft. The American spy planes were capable of climbing much higher

than any of the Puerto Rican planes, but they had found the means to disrupt their spying gear.

The President announced that in the afternoon the Puerto Rican delegation to the United Nations would deliver a resolution asking for the complete and absolute condemnation of the American acts of aggression against the Puerto Ricans. The resolution would also go to great pains to stress that the Republic of Puerto Rico had acted completely peaceful and had not done anything but foment economic cooperation between the two nations. In other words: the Republic of Puerto Rico has given the United States of America preferred economic trading status and has been paid back with overt hostility.

In addition to the United Nations motion, lawyers had been retained to file suit against the President of the United States for ordering the terrorist attack in the island.

Finally, President Roth announced an added bonus to Puerto Rican soldiers in the US: come work for us at the end of your service and we will transfer you in grade into the Puerto Rican Army. It was not necessary to say that this offer applied to soldiers who had decided to leave the service prematurely, that is, without informing their superiors.

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The Puerto Rican Chief of Staff was so happy that he felt like crying. A presidential scandal of such a magnitude would cripple the Americans for months, and would totally screw up their elections. If that was not good enough to celebrate, the whole mess injected President Roth's campaign with a serious boost in popularity. Less than four years since the island became a republic and it had already repelled an imperialistic attack without shooting one bullet. He had six months to take advantage of all these things and paint Roth like he was the fucking Father Protector of the Republic. The only way he could lose an election is by getting shot in the head.

The Chief of Staff thought about that for a second. While Roth seemed to walk between raindrops he still felt uneasy, especially since it was obvious there was no limit to the American's stupidity. He called the chief of police and explained to him his concern. The chief told him not to worry; they would take care of it.

**

There are two words that will get an American journalist on the warpath: Watergate and Pulitzer. Put those two together, and they will gladly sell their mothers and children if that would put them one step closer to either uncovering the next Watergate or winning a Pulitzer Prize. While the initial

reaction of the journalist profession in the United States was along the lines of “how the fuck did he pull it off,” the overall effect was to hype everybody up. If the president himself were in such a bad shape, there would be plenty more to be uncovered elsewhere in his administration. All the major papers and news bureaus had to hire pools of telemarketers to take care of the tremendous influx of whistle blowers calling. The insiders were fed up and they were dragging all the skeletons out of the closets.

The American public was overwhelmed. They had a sitting president playing war games against peaceful countries. Their president was being accused of promoting terrorism and now every day brought out even worse news.

The local Fox News affiliate in Washington DC was running a series of articles on tampering on the electronic voting systems used for the past two elections. The Washington Post was expanding their coverage of the presidential crisis. Time Magazine found the person (kept secret for his safety) that organized the bombing of the courthouse. He was under contract with the CIA.

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In Puerto Rico things were not running at a much slower pace. President Roth had ordered the FBI team declared persona non-grata after they were caught taking pictures of a Puerto Rican Militia armory. The Americans had protested but there was nothing they could do beyond returning the favor with some of the diplomats assigned to the embassies in Washington and New York and the UN delegation.

President Roth preempted the expulsion of the FBI agents. He had his Chief of Staff issue press releases condemning the espionage activities of the agents, and announced they would take drastic actions if their own diplomats were ejected from the US without cause. Roth hinted that the Puerto Rican economy was not tied to the Americans like it had been for the 106 years of American colonial rule. If the Americans did not play nice, they would have to buy oil elsewhere because the Puerto Ricans had plenty of markets they could penetrate at the current rates.

The Americans knew it was not an empty threat. They had switched their purchasing to Puerto Rican oil, which was of a much better quality and was cheaper too. They also built buses that the Americans were selling all over the Americas with a handsome profit thanks to the very nice tax benefits granted by the Puerto Ricans. The Americans were also making a bundle doing subcontracting with the Puerto Rican Defense Industries factories and

shipyards.

All throughout the states, dozens of high level executives realized that they had fucked up: they put all their eggs into the Puerto Rican basket, and not their own government was going to fuck things up for them. It was time to call their lobby and straighten things out.

Hordes of lobby organizations in the country increased their pressure on their elected officials. These people held real power on these officials, and going against them would cost them their next elections. They had no choice but to play along.

**

Two hours after the president of the United States was impeached, even worse news came through. A U2 spy plane had a hydraulic malfunction and could not drift out of Puerto Rican air space; it had no option but to turn around and crash-land in the Dorado Municipal Airport, about 20 miles west of San Juan. The crew of two were arrested and taken to an undisclosed location. The American Embassy in San Juan was informed that the crewmen were to be considered prisoners of war, and photocopies of their Geneva Convention cards plus fingerprint cards were produced to verify the claim.

President Roth, in another of his now common TV appearances, announced that since the U2 flight was manned by uniformed US Air Force personnel, he would consider them prisoners of war instead of spies. Had he elected to see them as spies (like, if for example the crew consisted of civilian CIA employees) then under the Geneva Convention (which Puerto Rico was not a part of) allowed them to be summarily executed. As prisoners of war they were entitled to visits from the American Red Cross and to send and receive mail, which was not censored by the Puerto Ricans. They would also be allowed access to a clergy person of their chosen religion, or a therapist if they were not religiously inclined.

President Roth announced that the POWs would be held indefinitely until the issues between the two countries could be resolved. When asked about the remains of the U2 spy plane, he answered that it had been destroyed soon after the pilots were rescued from the wreck.

This was not exactly the truth. In reality the crash landing barely hurt the aircraft. The landing gear was ruined, and the airframe was bent out of true, but everything else was intact.

As he was speaking on national TV and reassuring the American Public that the POWs were being treated in a civilized manner, a crew of students from CCT was driving two trucks with the remains of the aircraft from Do-

rado to the Western coast of the island. They would take the aircraft remains to the new CCT lab outside of Mayaguez; it was buried in the middle of the Aasco Pharmaceutical Park.

When the American press asked why no photos or videos of the POWs were shown, President Roth replied that under the rules of warfare he was forbidden from using the POWs for propaganda purposes. He had wanted to allow the two crewmen to record a short video to reassure their families that they were being treated properly, but his legal counselors advised him against it. The International Press was more than welcome to visit the POWs and interview them, and whatever material produced would not be censored in any way by the authorities.

Within the hour CNN and Reuters had teams on planes, soon to be followed by FOX News and APL. Due to airport delays FOX News arrived first, hoping to find the prisoners mistreated, but in reality they found that the two POWs were living in the lap of luxury.

Each of the two crewmen was restricted to a 2-story guesthouse (each located on opposite sides of the base). They had fully stocked kitchens and three times a day a cook was sent to cook to order whatever they wanted. The only thing they would not be offered was alcohol (but they did get coffee, cigars and cigarettes). The two men had at their disposal big screen televisions with American cable service. Writing materials and sealing wax were also provided (they would use their Air Force Military Academy graduation rings to seal the wax).

There was a catch, of course. As long as they did not try to contact each other without proper authorization, and they did not try to escape, they could enjoy their plush accommodations indefinitely. Any attempt to break these rules would have them transferred to the worst shit hole prison they could find for them in the island.

All American servicemen and women are aware that the highest priority of an American prisoner of war is to escape and return to American control. POWs are expected to organize their escape committees as soon as they are captured. This was of course bullshit, one thing is to try to escape a POW compound in Iraq before they stuck a bayonet up your anal orifice, and another thing is to try to escape a goddamn bungalow with all the food you could eat and premium cable TV service.

The bastards were not even trying to interrogate them! When the pilot balked at the idea of a Puerto Rican priest, his captors asked what he wanted. The pilot answered that what he would really like was to talk to his own

minister (he was Episcopalian) in Missouri. The Puerto Ricans promised they would look into it.

Half an hour later the US Embassy in San Juan received a bizarre request. The Republic of Puerto Rico requested that some Episcopalian minister from Missouri be allowed to fly to Puerto Rico to visit one of his church members. The ambassador scratched his head and forwarded the request up the chain of command.

The minister had recognized the name of the pilot in the news. He had been praying in a vigil with almost two thirds of his congregation when the news came. He left a deacon in charge of the vigil and ran to get packed. The minister was surprised when he found out he was being flown to Puerto Rico in a Lear Jet that was part of the Air Force's Special Missions Squadron based at Edwards Air Force Base, Maryland.

**

It was only a matter of hours before the press took notice of this. The press was a bit reluctant to admit that the captivity of the two crewmen was not exactly newsworthy: the two men were in perfect health except for one Band-Aid in the pilot's pinky (he cut himself getting out of the plane).

They looked well rested and did not complain of their captors. Having the priest arrive spiced things a little bit, since they were hoping that the priest would go off and start mouthing off at the wrong time.

He did not. Once he had a chance to talk to both crewmen he announced to the press that the Puerto Ricans were treating the two men almost as if they were visiting royalty.

The American press was suspicious that the Puerto Ricans were playing them like a fiddle, but there was nothing they could do but play along. The major networks had interviewed the parents and wives of both crewmen and everybody confirmed that the two men were being treated more like guests than prisoners. While everybody in the press was personally glad nothing bad was happening to the crewmen, professionally they hated that the goddamn Puerto Ricans were playing by the goddamn book. And worse, they were playing by a rulebook invented by the Americans.

The Americans were so used to have the moral high ground that they were dazed and confused with the prospect of actually looking like the bad guys to their own people. For the first time since the Vietnam Conflict servicemen once again were spat upon in airports and bus stations everywhere. Popular music acts did not hesitate to attack the establishment and their immoral intervention into the affairs of a nation state.

Things were complicated because the Americans honestly could not find a goddamn excuse to justify what they had done. The Puerto Rican president had worked his ass off with his housing, tax and job initiatives. He had made deals to get the oil production kick started in record time, and then resisted the urge to be greedy and instead opted to sell everything to the Americans at a discount. His first military force was created with constitutional prohibitions against deploying the militia outside of their territories.

In almost four years Puerto Rico reinvented itself into a strong, economically sound republic. And what did the Americans do? Instead of extending a friendly hand to help them continue their democratic initiatives, the Americans instead opted to fuck them. It was time to undo the wrong.

As the escalation unfolded, managing editors of all major newspaper in the country, and most of their counterparts in the TV news business, started working on op-ed pieces that would be presented over the next day or two. One by one, all major news outlets mounted a media blitz on the American public. It was time for the public to know what their government was doing to put the country in jeopardy.

**

President Roth's Chief of Staff cursed himself. He spent tons of money getting ready to mount a public relations attack on the American administration, but he had miscalculated the reaction of the American press! It was incredible that the American news media was doing a much better job than what he had paid his lobby firms to achieve.

Of course, President Roth was far from disappointed. Less than six months left for the presidential elections and he had no major opponent.

Chapter 25

Washington, DC

The nation was shaken since the announcement that the president would address the nation at 8:00 PM. The scandal was not something that could be swept under a rug, and the preparations for the impeachment trial were going at full speed. The nation did not need any more stress added into the equation.

Slowly, the white house pressroom filled up with the usual gaggle of career correspondents. White House security had been ramped up both on the open grounds around the house and along the rooftops of the nearby buildings. There were Secret Service agents posing as tourists walking around the outside fence. Some agents went as far as sit with the hippies in Lafayette Square to protest the imperialist interventions against Puerto Rico. The same hippies rotated their protests depending on what was a hot issue in that week. If it were a slow news week they would revert to their standard nuclear proliferation protest.

Bookies throughout the country placed bets on the outcome of the presidential address. The current odds were 20-to-1 that Wheeler would resign.

At exactly 8:00 PM, the country stood still, eager (more like anxious) to find out what was going on. President Wheeler did not disappoint and was quick, swift and to the point.

President Wheeler acknowledged all the accusations made against him and his administration and apologized to the country for his serious error in judgment. He apologized to the Republic of Puerto Rico and President Roth and announced his resignation effective immediately.

Millions of heads across the world had the same unkind thought:
The son of a bitch made a deal!

The cameras switched to the US Capitol, where in an emergency (and very secret) session, the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court swore-in the new President of the United States, Albert Finello. Vice President Finello had managed to survive the White House mess unblemished. It seems that the President had only wanted him to help deliver votes, and once the elections were won he told him to make himself scarce. It was not the first time it had happened, Truman went through the same ordeal, which backfired when President Roosevelt died and suddenly the country was in the hands of a man that barely knew what the hell was going on with the war.

The President of the Republic of Puerto Rico, rum and coke in hand, was watching the newscast with his wife, his only son and the Chief of Staff. Roth had daydreamed about this moment since he got the first proof of the Americans intervention on the island's affairs. Still, something did not feel right.

"Willy," Roth said to his son, "tell me what you see that is wrong."

"Uhm, I don't know."

"Do you know what a presidential pardon is?"

The Chief of Staff's eyes opened wide.

"This is like when the president is about to finish his term he lets go a few people out of jail?"

"Correct. Now, this is what is supposed to happen. When Nixon left, Ford gave him a pardon. What should happen now is as soon as things calm down, Finello is going to get Wheeler off the hook."

"Mister President, you think they will do that?"

"No. What I said is that is what should happen. I just realized there is no way in hell that Finello can pardon Wheeler. Doing this as his first political act as President of the United States will amount to political suicide."

"Dad, what's that?"

"Simple. Finello is a career politician. The reason he was Vice President was to help Wheeler, a non-politician, win the elections. The Vice Presidency was a gimme. If Finello tries to mess with the criminal charges against Wheeler, he is politically screwed. Even if the law of the land allows him to pardon Wheeler, politically he can't because he wants to win the next elections."

"Oh."

“Mister President,” the Chief of Staff said, “I am afraid I would not bet against you on that. Finello is not stupid enough to blow this one.”

“We’ll see how that goes.”

**

President Roth had two secretaries. The ornamental secretary was beautiful enough to run for Miss Universe, and she was dumb as shit. Her main job was to act pretty and walk visitors in and out of the president’s office. His other secretary, Mrs. Cortijo (nobody knew her first name, which suited her just fine), was a mean, 65-year old battleaxe that was as efficient and ruthless as a US Marines Sergeant Major. Her actual job was to manage the operations of the executive offices and to supervise the other three pool secretaries plus the ornamental one.

The old battle-axe walked into the family room and announced that President Finello was on the phone.

The conversation was short and civilized. President Finello apologized to President Roth and asked if a public statement would be needed. He also reassured him that all conspirators would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. When Roth asked about the fate of former president Wheeler, Finello told him to “keep an eye on CNN, interesting things are about to happen.”

The Chief of Staff had been listening on the call, and President Finello’s last statement made him raise his eyebrows once again. President Roth shrugged his shoulders.

“I guess we’ll find out whenever we find out.”

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Chapter 26

Mona Island

Republic of Puerto Rico

A week had passed since the sudden (but not unexpected) resignation of the American president. Mona island, which for years had been a protected natural reserve, now housed surveillance stations and a backup satellite disruption facility. One Puerto Rican Army infantry company protected the grounds and perimeter of the facility and there was at least one Puerto Rican Navy cruiser in the area at all times.

President Roth had ordered the disruptors to be placed on defensive mode. That is, the disruptors would not fire unless surveillance radar was detected from either a ship, airplane or satellite-based radar. Photo disruptors were turned off indefinitely.

The Puerto Rican Defense Minister protested the move, but Roth wanted to be cautious. The Americans took a bloody nose, so it was time to give them some room. Their photo and radar satellites were not geosynchronous, so they would always pass over the island regardless of their tasking. Puerto Rico still had the capability to disrupt these, but unless the move was clearly hostile, the Americans would be allowed to do this indefinitely.

American Navy ships were allowed to cross the maritime boundary mark as long as they did not object to be escorted by a Puerto Rican Navy ship. It was implied that as long as the Americans complied, the Navy would be allowed full-passage through Puerto Rican waters.

**

Exactly three weeks after the new president was sworn-in, another evening press conference was scheduled and the heads of the major TV networks were requested to preempt their programming. President Finello had played his cards with great finesse, and little by little the popularity polls were starting to lean his way. It also helped that so far the criminal trials for everybody involved in the conspiracy had corroborated former president Wheeler's statement that the Vice President had been left in the dark.

The people were curious of course, but there was not the sense of impending doom and urgency of the last big press conference three weeks earlier. Of course, the bookies were busy. The most interesting odds were 50-to-1 that President Finello would issue a blanket pardon for former President Wheeler.

The Chief of Police called President Roth to tell him about the bookie odds in Vegas, and he decided for the hell of it to organize an office pool. Between the cabinet members available, the secretaries (the ornamental secretary was gone already, but old battle-axe and two of the pool secretaries were still there) and even a couple of the policemen, put together a pot of \$100. After the Chief of Police arrived (with a brown bag with a liter of 20-year old Bacardi Rum) and joked that he would have to arrest them all for illicit gambling (this with President Roth holding the pot with the \$100) he went to the web page of a popular bookie in Las Vegas and placed a \$100 bet against the pardon. If they won, they would be splitting a \$5,000 jackpot. He even paid for the bet with his own credit card.

The Chief of Police winked at the old battle-axe and handed her the rum still wrapped in the brown bag. She peeked into the bag and signaled one of the ushers to bring shot glasses so everybody could have a little taste.

There was no way they could all fit in the bigger of the family rooms (there were three) so they picked their glasses and moved to the big conference room in the executive wing of the White House, where they had a wall-sized flat-screen TV.

President Finello announced that after careful thought, he could not in good faith issue a presidential pardon to former President Wheeler. He had no choice but to allow the Justice System to proceed with the trial. The whole speech lasted less than a minute, then President Finello walked out of the briefing room and let his Secretary of Justice to deal with the irate press (some of the reporters had not even settled in their chairs when Finello walked out).

The Puerto Rican White House erupted into a celebration. The First

Lady called the kitchen and had them setup a buffet in the outside terraces since the weather was nice, and everybody went outside to eat and celebrate. The Chief of Staff told the employees of the executive offices that they did not need to report to work until noon, so they might as well enjoy the food and the drink.

As the party wound down as midnight came closer, people started slipping out of the party. When only the Roths, the Chief of Staff and the protective detail were left, the Secretary of Defense asked President Roth for a minute alone.

The two men walked along the fortress walls, with a police escort 20 steps behind. They talked about what had just happened and how it would affect their long-term plans.

"Mister President, the politics of this situation changed our long range planning," General Meléndez said.

"Yes they do, but still, we can't be too greedy. President Finello is going to back off just a bit but it is only for show. In a month or two we will be back to square one, and he is not going to fuck up the same way Wheeler did."

"Yes sir. That is what I am afraid of. He can keep on spying on us and messing us up without doing stupid things like blowing up things and people."

"What we are going to do is start to revise all the plans, the imperative word here is quietly. I don't want any goddamn leaks."

"Yes Mister President."

"Work on the assumption that Finello is going to win the elections and he will cover his ass before trying anything. We no longer have the benefit of having a madman as the American President."

General Meléndez nodded in agreement.

"Also, if we have any operatives in the States, send them to sleep for a few weeks. We don't want to give them any excuses to toss the hot potato back to us, right?"

"In that we are lucky Mister President, all our operations are legitimate. We have either diplomats or lobbyists hired openly, so there is nothing they can do to us as long as we don't act stupid."

"Very well then, go home and get some rest. We have a lot to cover tomorrow."

"Thank you sir, goodnight."

Chapter 27

San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

Two months before the Presidential Elections in Puerto Rico, the bombings began.

The first attack was a mortar shelling of a Puerto Rican Militia armory in Sabana Seca. The attackers had setup their mortar on the bed of a cattle truck, so from ten steps away the mortar pipe looked like a normal metal pipe. The attackers lobbed ten rounds and then sped off. Two of the rounds were lucky shots; these landed on two Humvees parked in the back of the armory, killing the two Militia privates that were underneath one of the Humvees, checking the rear axle for a leak.

The armory had surveillance cameras, but the video was of no help; all they got was a very nice video of a generic-looking truck with two hooded men launching mortar rounds.

The local press did not take long to figure out the attack was in the same spot as the Macheteros terrorist attack of 1979. The cops doubted this was the work of the Macheteros since they were pro-independence; bombing the armory would mean attacking their own people.

Ordinance specialists from the Puerto Rican Army easily identified the mortar rounds as the same type now used by their own units (for now still of American manufacture, the government was in talks to license a design that could be manufactured locally). These were probably stolen from an Army National Guard or Reserves unit back when the island was still a common-

wealth.

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The second bombing was at a voter registration clinic in downtown Mayaguez. A student-run political action committee had taken over an old and abandoned building in Paris Street, right by the bakery. This old building had been used over the years as a local headquarters for the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), the pro-commonwealth party that was in power when the Americans ordered the plebiscite.

This time the bomb was a pipe bomb left under a folding table, tucked inside a backpack. The blast leveled the building and damaged the South wall of the bakery. Nobody was killed but three students were in critical condition at the Mayaguez Regional Hospital. Looking for witnesses was completely out of the question; fabric fragments recovered from the scene showed that the backpack was a cheap copy of an American Eastman backpack, and hundreds of local students carried backpacks like that one. Asking the people in the Laundromat and pool halls across the street was a waste of time too since Paris Street is a college student zone, and the locals usually can't distinguish them except for a very few that turn "native."

**

After the two bombings, the liberal (read: opposition) press went up in a rage. How the hell was it possible that in a rich country like Puerto Rico, with a good-sized police force, and its own militia, Army and Navy, this kind of thing could happen?

This was of course expected, as any politician that expects the press to take their side when something like that happens is pretty much unfit for public service. Even when the September 11, 2001 attacks happened, the press did not hesitate to start pointing fingers. It was how the game was played.

President Roth announced that a joint task force of the Department of Justice and the Police would run the investigation. He also announced that two companies of military policemen from the Puerto Rican Army would be placed under local control to help in police activities.

President Finello had called President Roth as soon as the second attack was announced, but due to the incident with the FBI men, President Roth felt he could not guarantee their safety while in the island. President Finello understood and reiterated that the resources of the American law enforcement community were at his disposal for the asking.

The preliminary reports were not good. The mortar attack was going to

prove impossible to trace since the arms were local. The pipe bomb was going to be a pain in the ass but maybe they could check for former US Army or Navy sappers that elected for one reason or another to not enlist in the militia or the Army when they were created.

For some reason that neither the Chief of Staff or even President Roth could understand, nobody bothered to compare the Puerto Rican and American constitutions side by side. The Puerto Rican constitution was obviously based on the American version, but it had subtle changes designed to close loopholes and introduce new ones. When they had finished the draft and submitted it they had braced themselves for the worst, but it never happened. The constitution was approved without much fuss.

The Puerto Rican constitution cleaned up some issues that the American version has when it comes to privacy in regards to law enforcement surveillance. This cleanup (in reality an intentional loophole) allowed police to request surveillance warrants to trusted judges. These special warrants could not used for simple criminal cases; the police must convince the judge of the national security implications. Intelligence operations in Puerto Rico were run from the White House, with a "Coordinator of Information" (Coordinador De Información, or CDI) that had the same basic function of Colonel Wild Bill Donovan in the opening days of World War II (his office was the forerunner of the Office of Strategic Services and later the Central Intelligence Agency). The CDI would receive the entire intelligence "take" from resources at the police, Army, Navy and Militia. His staff would then evaluate the information from a neutral perspective, which would allow turf wars between the armed services and the police, or among themselves.

The background check quickly yielded 15 former explosives specialists that resided in the island. These men had all received military training, roughly a third of them in the US Navy Underwater Demolitions/SEAL teams, the rest in the Army Ordnance Corps. Of the 15, 5 were in active duty in the Puerto Rican Army, and 3 were in the militia. Two of the remaining men worked in the construction industry. The rest were not accounted for.

CDI ordered exhaustive background checks on all 15 men just to make sure all bases were covered. Within a day banking, tax and driving records would be compiled, plus field agents would be sent to check out the area where these men resided and worked. A separate team would cross-reference these to look for discrepancies, like for example a Puerto Rican Army Sergeant with a terrible credit record and overdrawn bank account, yet driving a Cadillac or buying a new house with cash. The investigators were all trained in

the US, some were veterans of the American intelligence community, but a couple were ex-house detectives for banks and trading houses; their job was to run investigations in-house to catch thieves before they became a real problem.

As the dossiers of these fifteen men started to grow up, CDI assigned additional people to act as devil advocates. Their job was to find a counterpoint in whatever the background investigators found. This kept everybody honest.

**

There was a third incident, but it was not a bombing. A 911 call had been placed to report a rape in progress, right in the middle of the Nemesio R. Canales housing project in Hato Rey. The dispatcher sent four FURA troopers (a female sergeant, a male corporal and two female troopers) that were doing preventive rounds around the Plaza Las Américas Mall to race over to the project and see if they could make it.

The FURA troopers were riding in a Humvee that they had “borrowed” from a militia armory a while ago and forgot to return (it now had the Puerto Rican Police and FURA shields painted in the expected surfaces). The sergeant ordered the corporal driver to turn around and ride through a short ditch that separated the Plaza Las Americas peripheral road from the housing project. The corporal floored it, and simply launched the Humvee over the small ditch, to the delight of the two troopers in the back (the sergeant was not thrilled but she let it pass). When they made it to the spot where the attack was supposed to be happening, the hairs in the back of the sergeant’s neck stood up.

It was empty.

At that hour there should be dozens of kids playing in the basketball and handball courts, plus the usual drug pushers. But there was nobody. The drug pushers would not run if they saw a police vehicle, they had runners in place to make sure whatever illegal substances or guns they had, they would disappear before the cops got out of their cars. With President Roth’s new crime initiatives it just did not pay to shoot policemen anymore, easier to let them arrest you and then post bail.

The Humvee skidded to a halt, almost into one of the open basketball courts. The sergeant ordered everybody to jump out, and lock and load. She was carrying a 9mm Beretta, the same service model that replaced the venerable Colt 1911 in all the US armed services. She also carried a Colt CAR-15 carbine, which she automatically check that it was chambered and

safe. Her corporal and the two troopers were carrying .357 Magnum 4-in service revolvers (Puerto Rican cops prefer the Magnum .357 cartridge because it only takes one bullet to stop a person) and Colt M-16 A2 rifles. They did the same.

The four FURA troopers arranged themselves in a loose circle around the Humvee, but there was nothing to be seen. The goddamn place was completely deserted. The police radio in the Humvee came to life, asking for an update. The sergeant used her lapel-mounted transmitter to report that the place was empty and she wanted permission to bail before something weird happened.

The dispatcher took a second to reply in the affirmative, but it was too late. As the dispatcher activated her microphone to order the FURA troopers out of the area, the short staccato noise of rifles in automatic mode could be heard over the radio. The dispatcher was a disabled veteran from the second Gulf War and she goddamn well knew by heart what an AK-47 sounded like over a radio. Her mind went on automatic and she switched to the emergency band, and broadcast one phrase: Code Sabana Seca.

Once the code phrase was broadcast, the rest of the FURA that was on “warm” standby (basically a group of policemen would be uniformed and ready to go, so they would only need to grab their weapons and run to their helicopters in less than 5 minutes) was recalled on the spot. They would be in the air before they even knew what was going on.

The code phrase would also mobilize any police officer in a 5-mile radius. The code phrase was soon followed by a description of the situation and the location.

Two Bell Ranger helicopters from FURA, plus two more of the “borrowed” Humvees and every single police car that was in Hato Rey raced to the housing project. The first helicopter arrived to see a smoldering pile of metal where the attacked troopers should have been. The pilot circled a hundred feet above, trying to see if the troopers escaped but it only took him one sweep to see the four bodies a few feet from the burning truck.

The pilot started a second sweep of the area as the second helicopter and the police cars started to arrive. When he was halfway through his second sweep, he saw a flash from the corner of his left eye: a goddamn rocket!

The pilot screamed over the radio for the other helicopter to get away, then took his helicopter on a deep dive so he could hide between buildings. The rocket was just too goddamn short and tried to follow him, its proximity switch blowing it right above the helicopter as it was sinking between the

buildings. The shrapnel hit the helicopter but did not knock it out of the sky. It just started to smoke but the pilot was still able to control it.

The second helicopter started scanning for the launch area, then when they found the possible spot asked the ground commander (so far the ranking policeman was a lieutenant) to send people to check on it. Once the area was secured and the other policemen were checking the launch spot, the second helicopter went after the damaged one, which was slowly limping towards Plaza Las Américas.

The pilot thought that was the smart choice, if he set the helicopter down there could be more attackers in the area waiting for them. The pilot called ahead so emergency personnel would be waiting, and for extra police to cordon the area around the helicopter until ordnance experts had a chance to recover shrapnel fragments from the helicopter.

The pilot of the damaged helicopter managed to clear the last set of power lines and crash-landed it in front of the Sears Car Center in the parking lot of the mall. A protective perimeter was already in place, and at least the pilot and copilot managed to walk out of the wreck by themselves. The emergency personnel took a peek at the back of the helicopter and waved for gurneys to be rolled closer.

Of the six FURA troopers in the back, shrapnel killed one instantly when it struck him in the side of the head. When the pilot saw the trooper with his face half-thorn apart, he threw up on his shoes.

The other five troopers were alive, but they had bruises and in one case a broken ankle.

As the details from the attack started to emerge, the nature of the attack became the most disturbing. Each of the four troopers killed in the initial part of the attack had been shot once, with one of two different 50-caliber sniper rifles (the shots came from both sides of the Humvee). All of the AK-47 rounds were aimed at the Humvee and did little structural damage since it had Kevlar plates and run-flat tires installed. The initial guess was that the hail of AK-47 rounds was a distraction and that the attackers had plenty of time to aim and shoot the four troopers. Once the four troopers were down, a grenade launcher was fired onto the Humvee.

The rocket that was fired at the first helicopter to arrive was an American-made Stinger, which was shoulder launched. There was no doubt that they would trace back its serial number to a stolen batch from some National Guard armory years ago.

Chapter 28

Center for Caribbean Technologies

Mayaguez, Republic of Puerto Rico

Due to the severe strain that the bombing investigation was putting on the forensics labs in San Juan, the CCT was enlisted to perform some of the lab work to help trace the explosives in the pipe bomb. The CCT staff took on their new mission with a vengeance: many of them had at one time or another lived in the two student apartment buildings across the street from the bombing.

The CDI had narrowed down their investigation to three possible suspects, one of which was in the Puerto Rican Army; the other two were civilians.

Less than a week after the ambush in Hato Rey, the CDI staff struck gold. Of the three suspects, one had been sending encrypted emails back and forth to another of their original suspects. The idiot had gone through the trouble of using public key encryption (which is pretty much unbreakable) but then made two stupid mistakes: first, he posted his private key to a key server. Second, he used a weak pass phrase to protect his private key.

It took CDI (with a lot of help from CCT) less than a day to guess the pass phrase, so now they had the ability to read his electronic mail. Less than an hour of reading their traffic and they had enough to convince their favorite judge to issue warrants arresting both men and raiding their homes and businesses.

FURA was thirsty for vengeance; they had lost five good troopers (the

sergeant was a rising star) and they had five that would be out of commission for at least another week while they recovered from their lesions. On top of that, it cost them one Humvee and one goddamn helicopter, which would take a long time to be replaced (they did not know this but President Roth had ordered that the next helicopter purchased by the government would go straight to FURA).

The raids would be executed simultaneously, so two teams of FURA, regular Police and militia had planned combined air and ground attacks on the two residences (both in the same neighborhood in Arecibo). The combined teams would strike at 3:30 AM, and they were under specific orders to bring the two assholes alive. The northwest police district commander had threatened to bump down to rent-a-cop anyone that shot one goddamn bullet that was uncalled for.

As with the Cerro Maravilla arrests, the press was alerted after the attack was underway. That would give the press enough time to arrive to the area before the action was over.

The raids were a complete success. The “civilian” was awakened to find six FURA troopers in SWAT gear, pointing CAR-15s and trench shotguns to his head. He got the proper picture when the team lead, who had been in the second helicopter at the Hato Rey ambush, said “you move, you die, motherfucker.”

He did not move. They dragged him out of his bed, double-cuffed him and dragged him outside, where the press had barely arrived. The cops did not even let him hide his face.

Let everybody take a good look at the treacherous sonofabitch, they all thought.

The second raid was even better. Again the troopers stormed into the house to find the only occupant fast asleep. The problem was that they did not find him alone: he was sharing his bed with a boy that could not be a year above 13. He was also afforded the same courtesy announcement as his colleague (“you move, you die, motherfucker”) only this time the warning came from a lieutenant of FURA. His kid brother was the corporal killed in the Humvee in Hato Rey.

Since the boy was just 13, they had no choice but to wrap him in a bed sheet so the press would not plaster his photo all over the island. He would of course be arrested and interrogated, but they had already agreed to use him just to get at the sergeant they had just arrested.

The two arrested men and the boy were evacuated from the area in FURA

helicopters, which would take random routes on their way back to San Juan. With the area secure, the two houses were turned over to the Police (with CDI personnel posing as plainclothesmen detectives) so they could execute the search warrants.

From each house, computer equipment and crates of weapons were wheeled off and taken away in rented Ryder trucks and under Police escort. Everything that was taken out of the house was accounted for and paraded in front of the press, which grimaced (while at the same time quietly thanked God for an early Christmas) when the police started to line up in the evidence table an incredible amount of children pornography videos, magazines and computer games. Even if the sergeant could clear the charge on the bombings, he was officially screwed; there was no way he could avoid the child pornography charges or the sexual abuse charges on the 13-year-old boy. Worse, he had no future, Puerto Rican prisons were a brutal place for even the most common criminal, but the life expectancy of a child rapist in a Puerto Rican prison was less than 4 days.

While most of the press was concentrating on the steady stream of confiscated material being paraded out of the houses, a couple enterprising souls tried to venture around the backyard of the sergeant's house, hoping to sneak a peek into the house (which so far was off-limits to the press). The backyard was littered with discarded wood, rusted sheets of corrugated tin (used for roofing) and a half dozen old truck tires. The tires had accumulated rain water, which by law warranted at least a public health citation because these water-filled tires were the perfect breeding spot for the dengue-fever carrying mosquito, *Aedes Aegypti*.

One of the cameramen misjudged his step (he was trying to avoid the rotten wood) when he felt his foot give away. He slipped on top of the rotting sheet of plywood and crashed through it with a sickening thud: the plywood was trying to conceal a hole in the ground, at least 12 feet deep. When the second cameraman saw that he screamed for help, but did not drop his camera to help his competitor.

The pit was a 6 feet by 6 feet concrete-lined hole, with steel bars embedded into it so they could be used as a ladder. At the bottom of the pit was a metal trap door.

The reporter broke a leg, but except for the scare he was fine (plus his camera survived the fall, so he got some footage of his own rescue) and was pulled out of the pit. Before he was lying down in the ambulance he was already spending the bonus he knew he would score from his little fall.

The area around the pit was vacated, and FURA troopers prepared to open the trapdoor. A shaped charge was affixed to the lock, which would blow the area around the lock clean without turning the whole door into a lethal cloud of shrapnel. On a count of three the lock was blown.

A FURA technician was hoisted down for the few seconds it would take him to push an articulated fiber-optics camera through the opening in the trapdoor. With a hand signal he was hoisted back up. The team lead was using a joystick to point the camera around and see if anyone was there.

A man was cowering in one corner, his arms around his needs, his eyes shut tightly.

The lead had four troopers move down to the pit and prepare to jump inside of the room. A rope was tied to the trapdoor, so somebody from above would pull it open and the four FURA troopers would jump in after throwing a flash bang grenade (a grenade that overwhelms its intended target by both an incredibly loud explosion and a very bright flash). Three of the men faced the concrete walls, shut their eyes and covered their ears. The fourth trooper activated the grenade, waited for as long as he could trust the fuse and then signaled for the trapdoor to be opened.

The trooper screamed FLASH BANG, threw the grenade inside of the room as soon as the trapdoor started opening and then faced the wall and covered his ears just in time for the explosion. The flash bang grenade was a versatile tool used to temporarily disable people before storming into a room, and it did its job well. The camera had only caught one man, but there were two more.

The four troopers quickly turned around and jumped inside of the small underground room, then scanned their corners to see if anyone else was there. The man they had seen on camera started screaming. One of the troopers quickly jumped to his corner, placed a piece of duct tape over his mouth (each of them had three of these pieces of tape stuck to their pant legs) and strapped his wrists and ankles with very thick plastic handcuffs.

The other two men were in a second room to the left, but they were not interested in fighting. As soon as the smoke cleared they were found on their knees and with their hands above their heads. They were also gagged and hogtied.

There were two more rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom, and no more occupants. The men were carried to the trapdoor and then strapped into a rescue harness so they could be hoisted up without untying them.

The three men from the underground rooms were taken to the FURA

mobile command post, a big delivery-type van with a communications console in the back. The men were cuffed to inner structure beams and put under guard. While the forensics team scoured the underground rooms, their hands were scanned to do an automatic background check.

The technician that took the print scans saw the results of the scans, scratched his head and then checked the hands of the three men to make sure their fingerprints had not been tampered with in any way. All three men had intact fingerprint patterns. Not even calluses.

The technician took the scans for a second time, by now the three prisoners started to become abusive, but a well-placed jab in the ribs with a nightstick put them in the proper frame of mind. He submitted the second set of scans, and again after two minutes he got the same results.

Based on these scans, the three men he had in his custody were Victor Manuel Gerena, Filiberto Ojeda Rios and Carlos Alberto Torres. Gerena had been in the FBI's Top Ten most wanted for many years for his involvement in a \$7 million robbery in Hartford, Connecticut. Ojeda was the founder of the Macheteros terrorist organization, and Torres was one of his deputies. Torres had been imprisoned and was not supposed to be released until 2024, but the Macheteros helped him escape in late 2004.

After the initial shock of his discovery, the technician pulled himself together and called his supervisor, then called all the cops outside of the van and ordered them to lock and load and not let anyone within 20 feet of the van unless that person was wearing a badge and a gun.

Chapter 29

Fort Allen, Salinas

Republic of Puerto Rico

Fort Allen was an abandoned Reserves training base in the arid rolling hills east of Ponce. Its only claim to fame was that it had been use as a refugee camp more than twenty years earlier.

Because of its remote location and open approaches (approaching vehicles or aircraft could be spotted from pretty far) the Puerto Rican government reactivated the base and built a maximum security holding area. It was not intended to be a prison, but a secure place where high-profile prisoners could be held until it was decided what to do with them. Personnel from the Department of Corrections staffed the holding area, and the Puerto Rican Army controlled everything else in the base.

It was agreed earlier that even if the three outlaws were involved into the terrorist mess, they would be handled separately. While the sergeant and the civilian were to be considered innocent until proven guilty, the three outlaws were all fugitives and were not entitled to one goddamn thing. Because of this the three were placed in isolated cells, while the two bombing suspects where placed in regular cells. The civilian accused raised a stink about it, but the sergeant decided it was in his best interests to shut the hell up; if they decided to send him to one of the state prisons and the word came out about the naked 13-year old boy the cops found in his bed, he will be dead within the week.

The Americans had raised a stink when they found out that the Puerto

Ricans had found their three outlaws. They immediately demanded that the three men be turned over, but since they did not have an extradition agreement in place, they would have to work out the kinks of the agreement before an extradition would take place.

President Roth made it clear that he did not want any of the three men in the island for one minute longer than they were needed. His Secretaries of State and Justice ran the negotiations for the extradition treaty, which would be fast-tracked for the benefit of all involved.

While the civilian bomb expert's home was pretty clean except for the weapons and some traces of explosives, the sergeant's house (and the underground apartment) turned into a gold mine.

Apart from the child pornography that the police found in the sergeant's house, they found hidden stashes of videos and magazines, still shrink-wrapped. Thinking that maybe he was also moonlighting as a kiddie porn merchant, the CIO subpoenaed his internet service provider's access records and used these to cross-reference the internet activity logs in his computer.

Apart from the pornography, which pretty much nailed him for good regardless of the outcome of the bombing investigation, they had found small traces of cocaine in the bedroom, which he had claimed belonged to the boy.

There were many more nails into his coffin. The underground apartment had outlined plans of the ambush in Hato Rey, the mortar shelling of the armory and the pipe bombing of the political action committee in Mayaguez. In other words, he was fucked.

The three federal outlaws were obviously connected, but they would be dealt with at the proper time. What was important was to milk from the sergeant and the civilian as much as they could about whatever the hell else was underway in the island.

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The government could not hide the fact that Gerena, Ojeda and Torres were under custody. Gerena was common criminal, but Ojeda and Torres were seen as political prisoners by many of the original followers of the Independence Party, many of these also secret members of the Communist, Socialist and Nationalist parties. The protests in San Juan and out of the main gate at Fort Allen started immediately.

The irony was not lost on either the government or the press. These people were protesting the arrests of two criminals that had promoted deadly violence as the means to make Puerto Rico a free country. Puerto Rico was freed, but it was done with politics. These three men were nothing more than

relics of a previous era, but that did not stop the protests. The CDI figured out that the protests were not spontaneous, but since Puerto Rico had the same constitutional freedom of speech as Americans, there was nothing for the government to do unless the protests turned violent. The Chief of Police ordered a 2-tiered security detail for the protests: the policemen in direct contact with the protesters, that is, the ones in the barricade lines, would not be carrying side arms (they carried training dummy pistols that looked like the real thing and weighted as much). They would have to defend themselves with batons and Tasers¹. The second tier was a safe distance away, these policemen had their usual side arms plus they were prepared to shoot tear gas canisters.

The police knew it was dangerous, but the last thing they wanted was for an overzealous protester to get himself shot by accident, which would pretty goddamn well make sure the incident is plastered across the top fold of all the major newspapers in the world.

After the first protest there were no major incidents of violence. The protesters sang their songs of political persecution and liberation from the oppressors while the policemen scratched their heads in disbelief. The running joke between the cops was that the President forgot to send out a memo to tell the Socialists, Communists and Nationalists that the Americans were gone and Puerto Rico was a Republic.

There were also rumors that when the CDI suggested that maybe they should start to run background investigations on the leaders of these groups, the President went on a half-hour rage and almost fired him. These people had a constitutional right to assemble and they had freedom of speech, there was no way in hell he would approve such an investigation just because they were Communists or whatever. The only way he would allow them to do it was if there was probable cause of criminal involvement.

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The interrogations had started in full force. The civilian demolitions specialist and his Puerto Rican Army (suspected) co-conspirator had been kept isolated, and until then they did not know the other one had been arrested. The sergeant did not even know that the underground apartment had been found since he had been airborne before the reporter fell into the pit.

The civilian explained that he had sold the sergeant some explosives,

¹A Taser is a non-lethal weapon that delivers an electric shock that paralyzes the target individual temporarily.

blasting caps and control chips which he stole from his own stock at the demolitions company. He had met him during training in the states (something the CDI had not figured out yet) and they had kept in touch over the years. The civilian hinted that he did not like him on a personal level but he needed the money so he helped him out of greed. He also claimed that the weapons found in his home were all legitimate, he was a world-class rifleman and had belonged to the US Army rifle team.

The investigators left him in the interrogation room to compare notes with the director of the CDI, who was sitting in the room hidden behind the false mirror. The Director had already called the operations center to tell them to start checking the serial numbers of the weapons found in the stash at the civilian contractor's home, and to see if one of their computer whiz kids could look for old Army Times articles on the rifle team.

The man's story checked out with the encrypted emails recovered during the investigation phase. As far as they had checked, every communication between them involved a sale of explosive supplies. Since it would be hard as hell to prove that he had knowledge of the sergeant's ultimate intentions, they would be forced to prosecute him only for the theft and for the violations to the explosive substances control laws.

The sergeant was in a much interesting situation. Other emails had been intercepted that specifically named the three outlaws as directing the attacks. The investigation had been documented from day one with an eye on things that could cause evidence to be thrown out by a judge. They went as far as hiring an outside lawyer to try to poke holes into their case. The underground apartment was dual purpose. It was used both as a hideout for the three outlaws, and also as a command post for local operations of the Macheteros terrorist group.

The sergeant stated that the reason for the attacks was that Ojeda and Torres were furious when the Republic was established and nobody recognized the efforts of the Macheteros and the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) to help achieve that goal. The sergeant claimed that he tried to reason with them that regardless of recognition, the goal had been achieved: the Americans were gone and Puerto Rico was under democratic self-rule.

Ojeda and Torres did not give a shit. To them the Puerto Rican government was a puppet regime, and not the socialist utopia they had envisioned. Gerena did not give a shit either; he just wanted to hide from the federales. Helping Ojeda and Torres was just the means to feel useful after so many

years hiding.

The CDI interrogators kept pushing to find out the identities of the people that executed the actual attacks, but the sergeant claimed he was only involved in preparing the explosives and supplying the weaponry. He had been responsible for the bombs (built with material purchased from the civilian demolitions contractor) and for stealing the mortars and the rocket launcher. The AK-47 rifles came from hidden caches that the Macheteros had left hidden throughout the island.

The sergeant tried to raise the issue of the child abuse charges, but he was quickly waved off. He was told these criminal charges had nothing to do with this investigation and he was fucked regardless of what he tried, so he might as well cooperate.

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Ojeda and Torres also used encryption for their emails, but they made a tragic mistake: the pass phrase they used to protect the secret key for the encryption software was even weaker than the one that the sergeant had used for his. While they were still cooling their heels in their solitary confinement cells (where they were kept naked and fed only French bread and water), the CDI started reading and analyzing six years worth of old emails.

The task of processing the email traffic proved to be overwhelming for the CDI staff, so the Director activated an emergency plan that had lived in his personal safe since his first week in office. Plan “Harmony” was put into effect.

The operational concept of plan Harmony was simple. The CDI had to prepare for an uncalled national emergency that would put a strain on the analytical capabilities of the CDI organization. A secret Presidential order authorized the CDI office to perform background checks for screening Puerto Rican citizens that could be of potential use to the organization. As soon as the order was signed, the background checks started and hundreds of Puerto Ricans of all trades and backgrounds were investigated. The purpose of these investigations was to find experts in specific fields and to have them sign non-disclosure agreements (NDA) that would put them on a retainer for future CDI service. Upon activation, these experts would be quietly picked up and taken to secure locations where they could provide their expertise in whatever it was they were needed for.

When Harmony was activated, a second code word, “Library,” was used to specify which group of experts would be recalled. Library meant only people with special analytical skills would be recalled. Within 15 minutes,

teams of 2 or 3 policemen and at least one CDI officer visited the first 25 names on the Library list. Each of these people would only acknowledge the visit if a proper (individual) code phrase was used. In all 25 cases the men and women that were recalled acted a bit shocked, but in every case they put their doubts aside, said goodbye to their significant others, picked a pre-packaged overnight bag and left escorted by the policemen and the CDI officer.

The Library Team was comprised of an equal mix of men and women. All of the members had at least two years of college-level education, and all were registered voters. Political party alignment was considered secret and was nowhere to be found in their background checks.

The Library team was taken to a secure facility in the Sabana Seca base grounds. They would bunk two to a room, segregated by sex. The accommodations were equivalent to the old bachelor officer's quarters back when the US Navy still owned the base. They had a kitchen and dining room (the dining room had televisions tuned on CNN and hung from each corner) staffed around the clock and a recreation room with television, pool tables and a dartboard (not that they expected to spend much time there).

The team would be working on the underground level of the facility building. Their mission was not revealed until all 25 of them were settled in their rooms. They would be in charge of analyzing and cross-referencing all the emails recovered from the computers in the sergeant's underground apartment.

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The director of the CDI did not have much hope for the impact that the Library team would have on the investigation. He was painfully aware that just by throwing people into a project the main thing you managed to do was to push the deadline back. What he was most interested in was in having these 25 fresh minds catch on something that his people had failed so far. Fantasizing of the investigation running faster was as bad as trying to assume that 9 women together can give birth to a baby in one month.

Chapter 30

San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

With the extradition treaty negotiations almost completed, it was time to leverage the findings of the Library team. Slowly a chain of events had been traced and little by little names emerged. Very quietly combined FURA and police forces swept the island, arresting dozens of people directly related to Macheteros activities in the last ten years.

The liberal press screamed bloody murder and compared Roth's administration with the Spanish Inquisition. By then more than \$15 million in funds had been located and frozen, including most of the stolen funds from the Gerena bank robbery in Connecticut. That is when the press wars erupted.

The most conservative press had distanced itself from the blatant attacks of the leftist newspapers that insisted on carrying the fallacy that these three arrested men were political prisoners. Once the money trail surfaced and the government leaks started, it was time for them to enter the fray. A series of articles explained how the FALN and the Macheteros funded their terror operations in Puerto Rico and the United States by robbing banks on the Eastern coast and selling drugs in New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Connecticut. Incriminating emails had been released where operations had been outlined and ideology had been discussed.

Filiberto Ojeda Rios was exposed as a common thug, just one more thug trying to use politics as an excuse for his criminal activities.

During this whole mess, none of the three outlaws were interviewed in

any way. They were just kept in solitary confinement. The CDI was dying to get their hands on Ojeda and Torres, but their instructions were explicit and they were not to be contacted under any circumstance.

On the day that the extradition agreement would be signed by all parties involved, the US Marshal Service dispatched a prisoner transport airliner to Puerto Rico with a small army of US deputy Marshals that would take custody of the prisoners for their trip back to the states. They did not have specific instructions beyond taking delivery of the prisoners and make sure they made it back without a single scratch.

The plan was that as soon as the treaty was signed, the prisoners were handed over to the Americans. This is not exactly how it happened.

First, the Americans had understood that the extradition of the three men was automatic, but that was not the case: the treaty, in a brilliant display of the cunning use of small print, clearly specified that extraditions were on a case-by-case basis. The Puerto Rican government used this clause to temporarily delay the extradition of Ojeda and Torres.

The Americans were about to raise a stink when the Puerto Rican Secretary of Justice noted to them that they should consider themselves lucky to have Gerena. If it weren't for the Puerto Rican raids, they would have nothing. Now they can at least go back home and keep busy putting the slippery son of a bitch back where he belongs, in a federal penitentiary. Ojeda and Torres would soon follow, since President Roth had already made clear that he did not want either of them in the island.

There was nothing for them to do but to take Gerena now and worry about the other two later. By the time they went around to follow-up through diplomatic channels the Puerto Ricans would be finished with their interrogations and the two men would be handed over to the Americans.

Amnesty International had been keeping an eye on Puerto Rico since well before the establishment of the Republic. Of course they did not find anything to complain about, but their donations influx was drying up, so they needed something juicy to make noise about and hope to use the added exposure to bring in more donations. Once they found out the leftist press was considering the three men to be political prisoners, Amnesty International tasted the blood in the water and went into a frenzy as if they were sharks.

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Ojeda and Torres were of course oblivious to the media frenzy; they were still in isolation. They had not been allowed any outside contact since they were brought to Fort Allen, and they were starting to show the strain of the

solitary confinement. They had not been formally arrested, and no charges had been read against them. They were just locked up while the CDI figured out how to wring them out for whatever information they could yield.

Guards from the Department of Corrections opened Ojeda's cell and threw at him a bright orange jumpsuit with a tall letter "P" stenciled in the back and across the chest. He was not afforded the luxury of underwear or even shoes. Once dressed, his wrists and ankles were cuffed and chained and he was blindfolded. The guards walked him in circles to confuse him, and then took him outside to a Humvee that was waiting for him. The Humvee drove in circles around the building a few times and then parked in the rear. Ojeda, not having a goddamn clue where he was, was led back into the same building where he had been imprisoned.

The guards took Ojeda to an interrogation room that was equipped with a long metal table with steel rings welded into it. The guards unhooked the chains that tied the cuffs on his wrists with the ankle shackles, ran the chain through the welded rings and then hooked the chains again the same way they were when he arrived. With the chains routed through these rings Ojeda was not going to be able to move his wrists more than an inch or two. His feet were by all means immobilized.

The blindfold was not removed.

"Filiberto, do you recognize my voice?" A man asked.

Ojeda did not reply.

"Filiberto, I don't think you are in any position to be difficult. Your cause is lost, the country is a republic, and not thanks to one goddamn thing you have done in your life. You failed."

Ojeda opened his mouth as if to say something, then restrained his urge to mouth off.

"You failed," the man continued, "socialism is dead, so is nationalism. Communism died when the Soviets threw the towel. You are a smart guy, I know you figured it out long ago. Why? After lying low all this time? Why now?"

"Because we were left behind," Ojeda finally mustered the courage to answer.

"You ignorant, self-righteous son of a whore, it was never about you! It was about the country! You could have decided to lay low and nobody would have bothered to hunt you down you idiot! Do you know that because of you we had to put in place an extradition agreement with the Americans?"

Ojeda shook his head.

“Yes we did. And the first thing we did was hand over Gerena to the US Marshals. I am afraid that Torres did not make it, he slipped in the showers and hit his head,” the man lied.

“Bullshit,” Ojeda replied.

“Filiberto, Torres is dead. He told us about everybody else. We got the weapon caches, the \$15 million, everything!”

“That is not possible!” Ojeda was now sobbing.

“I have more bad news for you. We never booked you. We never read you your rights. There is not a piece of paperwork that mentions you being under your custody.”

“So what?” Ojeda replied.

“Well, for example, it means I can walk you behind the building, put a gun on the back of your neck and blow your fucking head off. Plausible deniability. We can erase the fact that you were our guest. We can send a nice video to the feds, they don’t give a shit if you are dead or alive, all they want is to get even for all the shit you made them go through.”

“You don’t have the balls to do that. And who the fuck are you?” Ojeda asked.

Ojeda felt movement from behind, then nearly lost control of his bowels when he felt the chain being unhooked. He was dragged out of the room and taken outside of the building.

Two inches from his left ear he heard the noise of a pistol’s slide chambering a round.

“Fuck you, kill me if you want.” He said defiantly.

They did not kill him. He felt something cold against his left knee, then started screaming as the trigger was pulled and his left knee was shattered by a 9mm bullet. Somebody slammed a patch of duct tape over his mouth, so he could not even scream. Whoever was holding him kept leaning him so he would put more weight on the left leg, which made the pain even worse.

Somebody pulled out his blindfold, and Filiberto Ojeda Rios found himself staring face to face at William Roth, President of the Republic of Puerto Rico.

“Tomorrow we are going to shoot your right kneecap,” Roth said as he ejected, the pistol’s magazine, checked that the chamber was empty and handed the weapon to one of the guards. Roth turned around and walked away.

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Torres had been in the same building all along, but he had not heard the guards come to take Ojeda since he was being kept in a different wing. But he did hear the pistol shot. Torres was already losing his mind, and the pistol shot told him the worst was yet to come.

Things did not get better when Torres heard the steel-plated door to his solitary confinement cell being opened. A guard threw at him an orange jumpsuit and told him to get ready to take a walk. Torres complied. He was too scared to ask about shoes or maybe some underwear.

The guards did not repeat the little production they had done for Ojeda. Instead, they just blindfolded Torres and dragged him outside. He was about to protest the rough handling, but a well-placed jab in the ribs took care of that.

The guards threw Torres in the back seat of a Humvee and drove away. The guards took an abandoned road that led to the isolated spot where the practice gas chamber used to be at. This was a cinder block building with tin a tin roof. Once a year all soldiers in the Army Reserves and Puerto Rico National Guard were required to take a refresher course on the proper use and operation of the issue gas mask. To prove the effectiveness of the mask, the soldiers were marched into the gas chamber and then tear gassed. The soldiers would then have 9 seconds to retrieve the mask from its hip-mounted carrier and put it in place. If the trainer were not satisfied with the performance of a given soldier, he or she would be forced to the back of the line to repeat the exercise. The cadre knew pretty goddamn well the power of negative reinforcement: even with the mask worn properly, the gas burned like hell (especially around the neck and the wrists) and nobody wanted to go through it twice.

Part of the exercise was that, if the whole group passed, the trainer would order the soldiers to take the masks off while still inside of the chamber. The idea here was that a nice little shot of tear gas was a great motivator.

Torres was taken into the abandoned gas chamber, and then ordered to get on his knees on the cement floor. He heard steps, then a voice he recognized immediately.

"Torres, you really fucked up. You should have stayed in prison, at least there you were safe." President William Roth said.

"You know damn well I had no choice. Filiberto said so."

"You were always his little bitch, that was your downfall. All these years in prison, for what?"

Torres did not reply.

Roth hit him across the face with the butt of a pistol, sending him face-down into the cold concrete floor.

Torres spit blood and started whimpering.

Roth pulled off Torres' blindfold.

"So now you are going to cry like a little girl? Here is something more for you to cry about: that shot you heard before we picked you up, care to guess who?" Roth asked.

It was a long time before Torres pushed himself to acknowledge that Filiberto Ojeda Rios was probably dead.

"Filiberto?"

"Yes, Filiberto is dead."

"That is cold-blooded murder! We have rights!"

"You waived your rights when you started fucking with us. We were going to leave you two fucks alone, but once you started blowing shit up, there was no way we could turn the other cheek."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Easy. I am going to give you two choices. Regardless of what happens, you are fucked."

Torres nodded in agreement, resigned to whatever the hell Roth had in mind. He was tired of all the running away, always underground. He was actually happy during his last years at the federal penitentiary. And Ojeda had come from nowhere, yanked him out of his soft berth and fucked him up once again.

"Your two choices: talk now, tell us everything and we hand you over to the US Marshals. Think about it: talk and in a day or two you can be back at your prison. Safe."

"And if I don't talk you'll shoot me right here and make my body disappear. Right?"

"Torres, I always knew you were a low life sack of shit and a fucking coward, but I always knew you were the smart one. You made the right choice."

"What about Filiberto?" Torres asked.

"What do you mean?" Roth answered while trying to put on his poker face.

"I know he is alive. Listen, I don't give a shit. Cut him in pieces for all I care, just get me the fuck out of here." Torres said.

Roth grinned.

Chapter 31

Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport

Isla Verde, Republic of Puerto Rico

Everybody sighed in relief as Carlos Alberto Torres was marched into the US Marshals prisoner transport plane. The Feds were still pissed because the Puerto Ricans kept delaying the handover of Ojeda, but at least they had two out of three. Maybe with a little bit of luck the son of a bitch slipped down some stairs and broke his fucking neck.

The departure of Torres was marked by even more protests and accusations from the leftist press. President Roth easily waved the accusations aside: the two men that had been handed over to the Americans were convicted criminals, and in accordance with the reciprocal deportation treaty between the US and Puerto Rico, the right thing to do was to hand over the two men so they could go serve their sentences. When asked if the Republic would issue passports to the two men if they were ever released, Roth answered that they were entitled to their citizenship by birth. Citizenship for Puerto Rican nationals was a right, not a privilege that could be taken away.

Torres had helped corroborate most of the CDI's findings, especially the analysis of the Library team. That by itself was not much help, since they already had enough evidence to get convictions. What made a difference was that Torres helped out with rooting out certain sympathizers of their cause that were deep into the Puerto Rican government.

When Torres offered these names, the investigation was halted. Due to the nature of the accusations, a fresh team would have to be brought in to deal

with this new list of suspects. And worse, even the CDI had been penetrated.

With not a lot of time left before the elections, the CDI went on round-the-clock operations, activating another of the Harmony action plans: Ghost. The Ghost team was comprised of former counterintelligence agents that had served in the US Armed Forces and had not been interested in duty with the Puerto Rican Army.

The Ghost list had been cross-referenced against Torres' list of sleeper agents in the government and thankfully none of them were involved. As quietly as team Library was recalled, the same process was repeated for Team Ghost. Their secure facilities were even similar to the ones used by Team Library, only theirs were located in Fort Buchanan instead of at the old Sabana Seca Navy base. Another difference: while Team Library was pretty much bound to a desk, all Team Ghost members were deputized and issued side arms and government badges that identified them as members of the Puerto Rican Army Intelligence Corps (again the CDI was copying old American CDI and OSS tricks from WWII).

With just a few weeks left before the election, Team Library gathered all the collected evidence based on Torre's list and locked themselves in their biggest conference room, where they staged a marathon evidence review. Except for bathroom breaks nobody left the room for over 18 hours, but since they had staff cooks on call just a few feet away at least food was not an issue.

The marathon paid off: over 85% of the leads yielded enough to warrant indictments. The CDI had a judge standing by and the arrest warrants for 46 Puerto Rican citizens and 15 foreigners, most of them American. The raids started at midnight.

**

While the arrests were taking place, the CDI Director, the Chief of Police and the President's Chief of Staff spent over an hour arguing about alerting the press. The Chief of Staff wanted to exploit the arrests for their obvious public relations value. The CDI Director and the Chief of Police would not have it; they were willing to run a press conference in the morning, but to alert the press so early was counter-productive.

The time spent in the argument was wasted. Before the first police vehicles started arriving with the arrested people, the sidewalks in front of the police headquarters were already lined with both the press and curious on-lookers. It was obvious that somebody had leaked the arrests. There were even one local TV station and CNN's satellite truck!

Everybody in the list was arrested, and thankfully not a single shot was fired. Each person was booked at headquarters, and then transferred to the former federal prison just outside of Fort Buchanan. The charges were varied but centered on conspiracy to commit murder, terrorism, corruption, treason and government service ethics code violations.

The penalties for these crimes (all were felonies) ranged from a minimum of 15 years without parole, to life.

**

The next morning, the Secretary of Justice offered a press conference to discuss the arrests. He explained that these arrests were the result of a long and painstaking investigation that was a direct result of the Cerro Maravilla incident. He explained that while some US citizens had been arrested in the early morning raids, they were not connected in any way with the illegal activities that the Americans conducted in the island.

The Puerto Rican citizens that were arrested were of diverse backgrounds: there were doctors, accountants, schoolteachers, soldiers and even two policemen. These people were part of a complex arrangement led by Filiberto Ojeda Rios, in which a systematic breakdown of the Puerto Rican Republic's government was plotted over the course of five years. The resulting chaos would allow Ojeda and his minions to take over power in the island. Because of his involvement, Ojeda would not be turned over to the Americans until his trial was over. In the remote possibility that he was cleared of all charges (after all, the constitution guaranteed that a person was innocent until proven guilty, just like the American version) then Ojeda would be handed over to the federales.

This of course enraged the Americans, but there was nothing for them to do. They were secretly grateful that the Puerto Rican Secretary of Justice so graciously discounted any American intervention in the Ojeda plot to overthrow the Republic.

Chapter 32

San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

Just like for the first presidential elections, the Puerto Rican government asked for the presence of international inspectors. The United Nations sent a delegation comprised of officials from the United Kingdom, Spain, Mexico, China, Greece, Norway and South Africa.

Again electronic voting would be used, and additional inspectors were required to keep an eye on the administration of the tallying equipment. The voter registration system was designed to grant the voters anonymity while making it virtually impossible for an individual to vote more than once. The Americans designed the system with checks and balances that would make the setup more accurate than the current standard system used for their own elections. Technology consultants from Germany and Japan were brought in to check the complete source code, to make sure there were no hidden traps or cheats.

The elections went without a hitch, and William Roth won his second Presidential term. In a moving speech he thanked The People for their continuous support over the last four years, and promised there was much more to come. Then he turned somber, and issued a threat to the Enemies of the Republic: get out and don't come back. Stay here and we will hunt you down like dogs.

The Secretary of State had argued long against issuing the threat at the end of the victory speech, but sometimes President Roth could be a hard-

headed son of a bitch. For example, when he found out that the plot to take down the Republic had at least 50 supporters.

With the elections out of the way, it was time for Roth to put his concentration back into the business of running the country. He still wanted to deal with the conspiracy element, but the last year's turmoil had slowed down his social agenda. The only good news was that the economics of the island were pretty much in automatic pilot.

**

Two weeks after the elections, President Roth announced the award of the newly created Presidential Educational Citation to two educational facilities: The School of Engineering of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez, and the Polytechnic Institute of Puerto Rico. Their combined research was critical to the creation of the compact battery design that had revolutionized mass transit systems in Puerto Rico, Central and South America and Africa (they were in talks to start building buses in China and Japan).

The award consisted of a pretty statue, a parchment certificate and free tuition and books to any engineering student that graduated in the next four years, with the condition that the engineer must pass the professional engineering bar test and they would grant the Puerto Rican government first hire option.

The cynics of course attacked this idea; they could not believe how the hell the country could afford to push these kids through college for free. The President counterattacked: the awards were won fair and square, and most of these engineering students already performed critical government service during the investigation of the bombing at the Ponce courthouse, and the other bombings right before the elections. The scholarships were the means in which a grateful nation honored these young patriots and that was the end of the discussion.

The President also announced a program to foster creativity among the engineers and other scientists in the Puerto Rican universities: invent something while working or studying at a state-owned facility and we will share with you a percentage of any revenues.

**

As the trials for the treason arrests started, details on their accusations started to trickle out slowly at first, then in one brilliant display of journalistic cooperation, reporters from the three major newspapers in the island pooled in their leads and co-wrote a series of stories with shared by-lines. These stories ran for a week on the cover of all three newspapers for 9 days.

The stories of the individual accusations showed a varied range of law violations, from the petty to the downright criminal.

In one case, a student had sold a list of registered members of the political action committee that was bombed in Mayaguez. The college had such list because the student group was registered so they could operate on campus. This information was used to select the bombing spot based on the potential victims (most of the students were from prominent pro-Republic families, something that the government had elected not to release to the public).

In another case, a courthouse employee had faxed copies of all the standing operating procedure (SOP) books that dealt with arrival, processing and handling of high-profile defendants. These books were critical to the planning of the courthouse bombing.

Most of the cases dealt with the improper transfer of controlled information, but some cases went much farther. There was a small band of men that were charged with the planning and training for an armed assault on both the White House in Old San Juan, and the Capitol in Puerto de Tierra.

The plan was to post sharpshooters off a boat, and start picking and killing the police detail on the White House one by one. When at least half the police detail was out of commission, two groups of men would land in helicopters in the roof of the White House, rappel down the walls and start killing everyone on sight, including the President if they were lucky enough to catch him there.

The attack for the Capitol was much simpler: Armed men would just walk in from both main entrances and start shooting indiscriminately until they ran out of ammunition.

After the two attacks were completed, press releases would be delivered to all major news bureaus claiming responsibility for the attacks.

The attacks would have worked in the commonwealth days, but as soon as President Roth was elected for his first term he had requested security reviews for the White House and the Capitol. There was always at least one Puerto Rican Navy Cruiser anchored in San Juan Bay, which would put its guns well within range of the White House and anyone that tried to approach it. All the cruisers had state of the art anti air missiles, and there was not a chance in hell that a helicopter would make it close enough to even spit on the White House unless the Cruiser allowed it.

The Capitol had additional security personnel posing as congressional aides. Had anyone bothered to scout the Capitol they would have noticed the disproportionate amount of employees that were over six feet tall and built

like tanks.

Everybody was of course glad that the band got dismantled before they had a chance to strike, but the worst-case scenario would have still ended up in failure for the attackers. The interrogation teams had done a magnificent job in fooling the men into testifying against each other. Somehow they forgot to ask for written proof of whatever plea bargains were offered in exchange for cooperation, a tragic mistake that the prosecution exploited to its maximum effect.

It was the overall opinion of the Puerto Rican public that these people were fucked and there was no way in hell that any of them would get out of the mess. It served them right for trying to screw up with the best thing that had happened to the island since Governor Luis Muñoz Marín won the first popular elections more than 50 years earlier.

The liberal press continued in making nuisances out of themselves, but little by little people just stopped paying attention to them, especially when the people started paying more attention to the electoral mess that was happening in the United States.

Chapter 33

Washington, DC

The Americans had their hands full with their own elections. The criminal trial of former president Wheeler was gaining momentum and was hurting the election campaign of President Finello. It did not matter if Finello was not part of the mess, he was in the same party and saints would have to pay for sinners.

This was not exactly a good thing for Puerto Rico. President Roth was not interested in vengeance but he desperately hoped that Finello won. Since Finello had to clean up the mess after Wheeler resigned and was indicted, he was in the best position to make sure the United States would stay the hell away from the affairs of the Republic of Puerto Rico. If Roth could get away with donating money to Finello's campaign, he would damn well try to do so. The problem was not money; it was that the opposition was doing too well a job of screwing Finello for being in the same political party as Wheeler.

Roth made up his mind: he would not donate to the campaign, but he was not going to stand by and let the fuckers screw up the one president that would not interfere with the island for at least another four years.

**

President Finello was not doing very well. The Wheeler trial was a god-damn fiasco, and with his bad luck it would be so deadlocked that he would be dead before a jury ever decides what the hell to do with him. Everybody knew he was guilty as hell, but he and his minions knew how to play the game and he was determined to go down fighting all the way.

After his daily status briefing, Finello's Chief of Staff hinted that they needed to have a personal conversation. "Personal" was the keyword that would direct the WHCA staff that was running the tape recorders throughout the executive offices to turn them off until further orders. Finello waited until his secretary called him on the intercom to tell him that yes, the recorders were turned off.

"Mister President, we have had a development."

"What is it? I don't have time to play Jeopardy with you of all people."

The Chief of Staff of the White House looked hurt.

"Danny, I am sorry I snapped at you like that, but this is just too much bullshit for a honest man to deal with."

"Mister President, what I have to tell you will probably cheer you up for once. May I?"

"Sure."

The Chief of Staff then handed a 3-ring binder to President Finello, and then walked him through the details of the "development" that he had just learned about 15 minutes before the daily briefing.

Finello let him do the talking and did not interrupt him except to make him repeat a couple things. Once the presentation was over, the President of the United States engaged himself in a very un-presidential-like display of rage. The stream of vulgarities could be heard throughout the West Wing offices.

The president walked over to a beautiful polished oak cabinet that concealed a small bar. Without asking the Chief of Staff (who almost never drank) he poured two stiff shots and handed one glass to him. Neither of the men considered that it was not even ten in the morning and people would start saying things if either of them reeked of whiskey so early.

Once President Roth started feeling the warmth of the whiskey in his belly, he spoke:

"Danny, call the goddamn Admiral right the fuck now."

"Yes Mister President."

**

Admiral Kenneth Hillbrand, former Deputy Director of the National Security Agency, had been retired for over ten years and still nobody dared to call him anything but "The Admiral." During his tenure (some would rather say "reign of terror") at NSA he became known as the one man that could be counted on to find out the dirt on anyone. After he left government service he tried to cool his heels fishing and playing golf but after six months he was

driving himself (and his wife) insane. She gave him an ultimatum: either get yourself a job, or get yourself another wife.

The Admiral opened a political strategy practice, The Independence Group (TIG), with offices in Bethesda, Maryland. He did not have the slightest interest in political strategy, but he needed a storefront close to D.C. that would not raise too many questions. What he would be doing at TIG was to lend his expertise in counterintelligence to American corporations that were afraid of industrial espionage. It was also implied that the Admiral would welcome the US Government as a client if they ever needed his services.

The Admiral was driven to the White House in a Secret Service Suburban, hoping the press would not notice him. He was taken straight into the West Wing.

“President Finello, I don’t want to sound rude but I am trying to run a business. Was it really necessary to literally kidnap me from my office, right when I was about to land the biggest contract of the quarter?”

“Admiral, I am sorry, but there was no other way. Please sit down.

A steward immediately walked into the office without knocking, and laid down a silver tray with a coffee service. The Admiral noticed a silver flask on his side of the tray. He knew the flask held brandy. It always surprised him (in a good way) how goddamn efficient the White House staff could be, going as far as recording trivial things like the fact that The Admiral Liked His Coffee With a Tad of Brandy.

The Admiral smiled and poured a little bit of the brandy into his coffee cup, then offered it to President Finello, expecting him to turn it down. He did not.

President Finello actually put a healthy shot into his coffee cup.

“Admiral, something fell into my hands. I need somebody with the utmost discretion to check it out for me. You are the only person I know that understands the meaning of that word. Understand?”

“Yes Mister President, I know what you mean.”

President Finello handed the 3-ring binder to the Admiral.

“I want to check everything in that binder. I want to know how much of that is for real, and I want physical evidence. You think you can hack it?”

“Of course I can Mister President. We’ll take care of it. Cover story?”

“You came here to play cards with me and the missus.”

“Oh. And who won?”

“I don’t know. Let’s call her and also David, that way when we all get indicted we can swear on a bible that we sat here for one hour, played bridge

and then had lunch.”

“Yes, sir, based on the circumstances I think that is a wise choice.”

Chapter 34

Colegio Universitario Tecnológico de Bayamón (CUTB)

Republic of Puerto Rico

The CUTB was a satellite campus of the University of Puerto Rico system. It sat on a quite small tract of terrain almost on the southern border of Bayamón. The peaceful suburban campus held the standard liberal arts and business curriculum as all other satellite campuses of the system. In addition to this core curriculum, it also held special programs for some disciplines.

The University of Puerto Rico's main campus at Rio Piedras does not have the room to educate all their premedical students. By having some of these students take their premed elsewhere within the network, classes are less crowded and facilities don't have to be strained. CUTB was one of the satellite campuses that ran the premedical program. It also meant the kids from the area could take a 15-minute bus ride their first two years of college, instead of having to spend over an hour commuting to the main campus. Even with the new metro rail service, it took time to travel to the train stations.

CUTB also had a special program for engineering students. The idea here was to keep the kids that lived in the San Juan Metro area from having to live in student housing in Mayaguez (many of these kids were prodigies that graduated High School at 16 or earlier). Instead of sending Junior to live in student housing, Junior could take the bus to CUTB and take the same courses as his friends in Mayaguez, by the same professors that taught them at the main campus (they rotated the professors). That gave Junior a couple

extra years to grow up a little more before being thrown into the jungle that was the Mayaguez Campus.

The CUTB was built as a collection of single-story buildings arranged in four staggered rows that ran slightly uphill from the main road. The walkways between the buildings were roofed, so students and staff could move between any two buildings without worry about getting soaked in the daily tropical downpours. The first building was the theater, then the library to its right. All the center buildings were used for some kind of administration purpose (for example, the next building after the theater was the student aid office) and also for professor offices.

The campus was so small that from the last building in the back (recreation center) to the back fence was less than 50 feet. Even less, sometime in the eighties somebody built wooden benches and roofed them so students could take a little air while they were cramming for finals. Or making out.

While the cafeteria provided decent food, it was too expensive. Some enterprising individuals took advantage of this situation from early on, and the solution was simple. Every day at 5:30 AM a half-dozen cargo vans converted to rolling kitchens would park right outside the front entrance to the campus. Again, the small size of campus played to their advantage, since even from the athletic field in the back corner of the campus it was possible to walk to the vans in less than five minutes.

The vans cooked fast-order food plus sold sodas, juice and candy. It was hard work but everybody knew each of these six vans was making more money than the dean of the CUTB. The most popular of the vans was not the one placed closest to the center-front entrance. That honor went to the van that parked next to the closest.

A short, stocky and ageless man (the consensus was 45 years old, but who the hell knew for real?) ran this van with near military precision. Funny thing, nobody knew his name. Since he greeted everybody as “My Friend” (he said it in English) everybody just took to call him that, so the van was known throughout the school as “My Friend’s Place.”

Due to the constant activity around the front gates of the school, security was virtually nonexistent. The college had a few rent-a-cops but they spent most of their time ticketing student cars.

Due to this overall lack of security and the chaotic nature of the movement around the front area of the campus, nobody looked twice when a Federal Express cargo van parked in the loop road in front of the theater, its driver left with a binder and walked into the campus. He even left the engine

running.

The driver simply walked into the mass of students and disappeared into the teacher offices building. There, with a key he had been provided before, he unlocked the office of an English Literature Professor that had called sick for the last three days.

45 Seconds later the FEDEX driver walked out of the student building, only now he was clean shaved, his long hair loose (he had it tucked inside of his uniform cap) and wearing a black heavy metal band t-shirt and cargo pants, with filthy running shoes. He carried an old backpack that was so worn out that it was amazing it did not disintegrate under the weight of anything heavier than a notebook.

The FEDEX-driver-now-turned-student (he was amazed at how well he managed to blend in, even the girls were smiling at him) traced back his steps and waited in the loop road until a 15-year old Volvo pulled over. The driver, a lady old enough to be his grandmother, waved him into the car, then sped off.

90 seconds after the Volvo left the loop road a remotely triggered signal detonated the cargo of the FEDEX van. The van was crammed all the way to its roof with a mixture of ammonium nitrate (basically, common fertilizer), and diesel. The explosive mixture did not have shrapnel mixed, the bomb designers elected to use the body of the van as the only direct source for shrapnel.

Due to the position of the van, slightly downhill from the four rows of buildings, the explosion had a devastating effect on the theater (thankfully, empty at the time) and the library (which was crammed with students). The bomb also blew all the windows that faced east, but except for the theater and the library most of the campus buildings were unharmed.

The explosive wave was strong enough to flip the three kitchen vans closest to the front fence, triggering oil fires in every case. "My Friend's" van did not get damaged, but the explosion almost killed him of a heart attack. When he realized he was alive and started to see kids running and screaming, he called 911 and reported the explosion (four other kids and one of the rent-a-cops had done the same, so emergency vehicles had been dispatched already).

Once done with the 911 call, "My Friend" locked his cash drawer, pulled his first aid kit from under the counter and ran to see if there was something he could do to help.

The first unit to arrive was a fire truck company from right across the

street from the campus. They were jumping into their trucks before the first 911 call had been dispatched. Soon after they arrived, Puerto Rican Army helicopters from the medical evacuation unit at the Fernando Luis Ribas Dominicci airport (named in honor of a Puerto Rican pilot in the US Air Force that was shot down in a F-111 Fighter/Bomber while bombing Lybia in 1986) in San Juan started landing in the athletic field, with one helicopter remaining airborne to act as local air traffic control¹.

Next to arrive were local police and every ambulance they could get a hold of in the San Juan metropolitan area. A command post was established in the faculty parking lot of the campus.

Thankfully the construction of the campus meant almost no fires after the explosion. Most of the damaged buildings had just collapsed under their own weight. Firemen were on standby while the rescue crews started searching the rubble for any students trapped under. Right as the only Engineering Battalion of the Puerto Rican Army started arriving with cranes and other machinery to help with the rescue, a Puerto Rican Police helicopter landed in the middle of the avenue, which was blocked by military police to help ambulances get in and out of the area as efficiently as humanly possible. The helicopter doors burst open and the President of the Republic of Puerto Rico and his First Lady jumped out, then started running into the campus. The protective detail simply ran after them and tried to keep a protective circle around the First Couple.

The policemen and other rescue personnel already in the area recognized them but did not figure out why they were there so early. Any politician with half a brain knew this was the kind of disaster that warranted a personal visit by the leadership, but not while the whole goddamn place was still smoldering.

The First Couple had been having a quiet lunch when the radio announced the bombing. Completely by reflex, the President screamed for his helicopter to pick him up on the spot and take him there. When his wife said she was coming along, he did not dare to oppose her: their only child was a pre-engineering student at CUTB and had just called from the lobby of the library not 15 minutes before the bombing.

¹This procedure was pioneered by the courageous helicopter pilots that swarmed on 1986 New Year's Eve to evacuate people from the roof of the Dupont Plaza hotel in San Juan. Knowing it would be just a matter of time before a crash happened, one of the Puerto Rico Army National Guard helicopters in the area stayed above the rest and acted as an improvised air traffic controller.

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Willy Roth had in fact been at the library about 20 minutes before the bombing. But his friends got hungry and “My Friend” was too crowded, so they jumped in the car and drove to the Pizza Hut about a mile north of the campus. The restaurant had televisions hung from the ceiling and in almost every corner, so they caught the whole mess on live TV. Willie Roth wanted to go back to the campus but it was obvious from the newscast that there was no way in hell they could drive within half a mile of the campus. They decided to stick around the Pizza Hut and watch the disaster unfold on the live newscast.

The kids were handling themselves pretty well for such a horrific sight, especially since half their study group had stayed behind at the library. It all changed when Willy recognized his dad and mom running from the helicopter.

“Holy shit! They think I’m in there!”

They had paid for their food already, so they just ran to the car, hoping they could get close enough.

While they were speeding toward the college, Willy tried to reach his dad on his cell phone but the local cell was overloaded with emergency traffic. When they made it to the police roadblock and the cops would not let them pass, Willy showed the cop his White House access pass.

The pass caught the attention of the policeman, but he still did not let him pass. He radioed his supervisor, who vouched just for Willy; his friends must stay out of the barricade.

Willy assumed that if his parents were there, the press would be hounding them mercilessly. He looked around until he saw a gaggle of reporters gangling up on somebody (that Willy could not see from where he was standing).

Knowing it was just a gamble he walked to the gaggle to see what was going on. The improvised press conference was almost over, so Willy waited for the reporters to disperse before he approached his parents.

His mom’s makeup had run, like if she was crying. His dad had a look he had learned to recognize since he was little. It was his “things are going to come out the way I want them” look.

When they were alone, Willy simply sat in the bench and said hi. His mother looked up and threw herself at his arms. His father just sat there, quietly thanking God that his only child had been spared. After a minute passed he started sobbing uncontrollably.

A photographer had stuck around when he saw the tall kid sit by the President and his wife, thinking he was a friend of Willy's trying to console them. Once both the First Lady and President Roth were crying did he figure out what had happened. His photo of the moment was plastered on the front pages of all the newspapers in the island, and was later picked up by Associated Press for international distribution.

**

The President of the United States had spent a very long 15 minutes pacing the oval office when his visitor finally arrived. The Admiral did not waste time on formalities.

"Mister President, everything is true."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Look at the report," he said as he handed over a thin leather bound folder, "it has my name on it. It better be goddamn right or it is my reputation on the line."

"Yeah, I guess you are right. Do you have any idea what to do with this?"

"Mister President, you are putting me on a spot, that is way over my head!" The Admiral protested.

"Just give it a shot, think of what I got to lose and use that to color your judgment."

"Well sir, the way I see it you stand to lose everything. I guess its double or nothing?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to hear it from somebody else."

"Sir, if it was my call I would make the sons of bitches pay pure hell for it. Of course politically it would mean saving the election, but my motivation would be to have the satisfaction of screwing them. And legally too."

"Duly noted Admiral, I guess I owe you one."

"Can I try some of that whiskey before you get to see my bill and throw me in jail with those jackasses?"

The President of the United States laughed heartily, and then signaled the Admiral to pour himself a drink and then to refill his.

**

The President of the Republic of Puerto Rico, William Roth, was more than a little drunk. The van bomb had been powerful enough to level off the whole campus and of killing most of the kids and employees, including his only son. Either by luck, design or incompetence, the bomb did not have shrapnel mixed-in. Had the bomb designers decided to mix it up with steer bearings or even scrap metal, it would have been a different story: the

combined destructive force of the bomb and thousands of metallic fragments would have turned the bombing scene into a carnage.

Thankfully, none of this happened. Nobody was killed, and most injuries were broken limbs and contusions. The bomb squad had already located fragments of the detonator, which could then be traced further. Tracing the explosive was futile: it was a home brew made out of legal materials.

While Roth nursed his drink, his wife and son had been making rounds in the hospitals where the kids from the college and the employees were being treated.

The public, as expected, had reacted with outrage and disbelief. A press release from unknown parties had taken credit for the bombing and demanded the immediate release of Filiberto Ojeda Rios to avoid further bombings.

President Roth's reaction was to crank up the heat on the additional leads the police and CDI had collected after the big wave of arrests weeks before the elections. Ojeda was still in solitary and was not allowed to contact his lawyers since he was not formally arrested, instead he was in "temporary hold" while his prisoner status in the United States was validated by the courts.

Chapter 35

Fort Allen, Salinas

Republic of Puerto Rico

Filiberto Ojeda Rios was in a lot of pain. After he was shot in his left knee he had been taken to a base dispensary and given painkillers, and his wound was treated. His left knee was in a brace and it hurt like hell to even stand up. Since his status as a prisoner had not been established, penal policies did not apply to him so medical care was at the discretion of the guards.

After he was brought back from the dispensary, he was sent to the same isolation cell but was allowed to keep the orange jumpsuit. After so many weeks in isolation he slowly started to lose touch with reality. His lifelong dream was forever ruined: there was no way the Puerto Ricans will see his way now that the puppet regime was in place.

Since that son of a whore Roth shot his knee in cold blood, Ojeda had been terrified of hearing steps approaching his cell. Every time somebody delivered his food, he thought that would be the time when they would drag him outside one more time and make good on their promise to blow to pieces his other kneecap.

The guards of course knew this, since his cell had cameras (he was on an unofficial suicide watch) and they had seen him shake uncontrollably every time somebody approached his cell.

From early on they had started playing cruel mind games with him. For example, they tried to keep him awake for days at a time. Or they would change the meal schedule to make him think he was losing his mind.

His only real connection with reality was one corrupt guard that had agreed to act as a courier for Ojeda's contacts. The greedy son of a bitch was costing a fortune, but it was the only way he could issue instructions since he was not allowed to even talk to a goddamn lawyer.

**

The guard was not very bright. He thought he could just pull the same kind of scam he did while he worked at the regional prisons in Ponce and Bayamón. He would shake down the rich prisoners in exchange for passing some harmless messages and maybe a tiny amount of drugs (enough for the prisoner to use, but not enough for the prisoner to jeopardize the ongoing drug trade in the prison).

What the guard did not think of was that as soon as the group that wanted Ojeda free took credit for the college bombing, it would be a matter of time before somebody would decide to crank up the security around Ojeda. He was just too dumb to even realize in what a mess he was getting into.

The Director of the Department of Corrections used to be a political appointee since the times of Spanish occupation in the island. It was an accepted custom that the top person that actually understood the business of running a prison system was one of his deputies, someone along the lines of a Chief Operations Officer for the prison system. While the Director (acting as if he was a Chief Executive Officer) went around making speeches and sitting at committees, the Operations Director got his hands dirty keeping the prison system safe and fair for everyone.

The Operations Director had risen through the ranks. He had started as a guard, then got disgusted with the blatant abuses of the administration and quit his job to go back to school. After he finished his Masters Degree in Public Administration he was hired back by the Corrections Department and had stuck with them for the last twenty years, earning also a Law degree and passing the bar exam along the way. The Director of Operations was the proverbial round peg in the round hole as far as the administration was concerned.

He had been worried about the security arrangements from day one, and it was him that proposed the creation of the holding facilities in Fort Allen. What he did not think of was to screen the guards that would be assigned to run the facility. After the bombing, he had agreed with both the CDI Director and the Chief of Police that they had to double check anyone that had daily any kind of contact with Ojeda, just to be safe.

The easiest thing was to pull the service files for the 12 men (there were

no female corrections officers assigned) that were assigned to run the facility. To his dismay, at least half of them had blemishes in their records, ranging from use of excessive violence against prisoners to improper contacts with them. At least three had done some kind of smuggling while on duty.

The Director could just push the review further, but he was displeased enough to rotate everybody out of the holding facility. He called CDI and the Chief of Police and told them he would immediately rotate out everybody, and then all 12 men would be at their disposal for interrogation.

The 12 men worked in two teams that switched every 12 hours. They were restricted to the base for their 90-day tours, and then they would rotate back to their normal jobs while another 12-man crew was sent to Fort Allen to take over. Their quarters were in a barracks building across the road from the holding area, so all they had to do was walk a few yards to report for their shift.

The current crew did not know that anything out of the ordinary was going on until they noticed that the school bus was followed by police vans. The new crew took their briefing but avoided to comment on what the hell were the cops doing there. When the outgoing crew went to the barracks to pack up their bags, they noticed that the second half of their team was being marched into the police vans, and they were cuffed. Before they could protest policemen sneaked behind their backs, put a gun on their neck and cuffed them too, then marched them to the vans too.

There were no formalities, no Miranda-type warnings, no charges or accusations read. The men were too excited to notice that not everybody was put into a van in pairs. Three of the men were sent on their own with just policemen keeping them company in the back of the vans.

Once the three vans sped off, the other vans were opened again and the handcuffs were removed. It was then that it was explained to the guards what was going on. The nine men were enraged and pledged whatever support they could give to the investigation. All nine volunteered to take a polygraph test on the spot.

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The other three men were driven to the headquarters building. Each man was taken to a separate conference room where a CDI team awaited with a polygraph rig.

The three polygraph specialists were retirees from the federal government. Each of the three men had more than 20 years experience in administering these tests, and it took them less than three hours to nail the two men

that had been working together in squeezing Ojeda for what he was worth.

The third guard was sent home but with a police escort that would tag along for the next couple days, just in case.

The two remaining subjects confessed everything. One delivered letters and trace amounts of cocaine to Ojeda, while the other tampered with the security tapes in the nave hope that it was enough to cover their acts. They made plea bargains in exchange for the identities of the people that were communicating with Ojeda.

Chapter 36

La Fortaleza, San Juan

Republic of Puerto Rico

President Roth was nursing a headache; a combination of a hangover and the ass chewing that The First Lady gave him: It Was Time To Get His Presidential Head Out Of His Presidential Ass.

She was right, of course, but that did not make it any easier to deal with the headache. His only relief was that right as he was popping some aspirin to deal with the headache, the low life assholes that had coordinated the bombing for Ojeda had been arrested and on their way to central booking. He had no choice but to put that son of a bitch Ojeda in trial, as much as he wanted to put him on the US Marshal plane and let them deal with him.

President Roth felt as the headache started to recede, then made a terrible mistake: he turned on the small TV in his office and switched it to CNN.

CNN Headline News had a red scrolling ticker banner along the bottom of the screen announcing that sweeping indictments of the top leadership of the Democratic Party had been released earlier in the morning, and that the President would issue a statement within 15 minutes. Roth screamed at the old battle axe to have everybody gathered in the big conference room and to have somebody start rolling all the other television sets so they could keep an eye on all the news channels: something big was happening.

The conference room had a giant screen TV, and was wired so more television sets could be wheeled in and connected to the cable TV feed. The original plan was to cover a wall with television screens and control them

with a computer, but Roth had thought it was wasteful. It was easier to assign a bunch of television sets to the higher-ranking office personnel and make sure they were easier to move around.

Roth called the CDI to make sure they were watching the news too, and told the director they would be holding a staff call to discuss the developments.

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President Finello announced that the President of the Democratic National Committee, the three main runners in the upcoming Democratic Presidential Primaries and five U.S. Senators (four Democrats, one Republican) had been indicted on various counts of campaign funding violations, tax evasion and obstruction of justice. In addition, warrants had been issued for the arrest of thirteen individuals in various public offices that had been caught in the process of selling sensitive information to a foreign power.

Roth's staff watched silently, and he could see it in their faces that they it did not take much imagination to figure out which foreign power President Finello was referring too. Roth knew too, it was him that leaked the information to the Americans. This was of course secret, only the CDI Director knew about the leak. The Americans would not risk the leak because it was Roth's olive branch to Finello.

Roth believed that there was no reason to antagonize the Americans in order to get what he wanted. There was a way to get things done while keeping them happy. If he had to sacrifice a few low-life greedy assholes that were willing to sell their own country, then so be it. As for the politicians, nobody would shed a tear for them.

Roth thought about how different the island was now than when the Americans set it lose. Puerto Rico was self-sufficient. It had its own Army and Navy. It built its own aircraft, ships, buses and even some weapons. Drug usage was down and petty crime was almost nonexistent. People had real jobs and the ranks of citizens on welfare were thinning little by little once they realized how easy it was to get a good education or vocational training, with the resulting good paying jobs.

The higher education institutions had gone into high gear with the introduction of the patent award incentives. Nothing like free tuition to light a fire under people's butts to come up with usable inventions!

The most important thing was that the United States were effectively neutralized, at least in the political sense. The Caribbean Basin belonged to Puerto Rico and there was nothing the Americans could do to stop them. As

long as Roth (or his successor if he lost the next elections four years down the road) played his cards well and stuck to political scenarios, there was no limit to what the Republic could achieve.

Roth called his Chief of Staff.

“Yes Mister President.”

“Are we ready for the next phase?”

The Chief of Staff blinked hard, it was the last thing on his mind at the moment.

“We are as ready as we can be.”

“OK. Place the call.”

“Yes Mister President.”

The Chief of Staff walked across the hall to his suite of offices. As a matter of protocol there was a liaison officer from the CDI on duty at the White House around the clock.

The Chief of Staff approached the liaison officer and handed him a plastic card about the same size as a standard credit card. The card had embedded 18 small computer chips, arranged in three equal rows. Each chip had its own set of contacts that could be activated by the proper reader.

The card was useless unless it was known which of the 18 chips was the valid one. The liaison officer waited until the Chief of Staff pointed to the one chip he wanted him to use.

The liaison officer inserted the card into a reader he kept in his briefcase (which was usually chained to his wrist) and waited until the reader completed its encrypted radio link to the CDI headquarters in Fort Buchanan. An electronic chirp signaled that the message had been delivered.

The liaison officer was oblivious to the nature of the message, which was obviously pre-canned. His job was to help the Chief of Staff communicate in a speedy manner for sensitive jobs. The card method allowed the Chief of Staff to send a “go mission” command to CDI without having to lift a phone that could be tapped into.

As soon as the message was received at CDI, the facility was put into high alert. Shift changes were effectively canceled, and nobody was authorized to enter or leave the main facilities until the mission tasking was completed. Both the CDI himself and Captain Ramiro Velez were out of the facilities (they were actually playing golf in Sabana Seca), so they were sent coded messages to warn them that action plan “Quisqueya” was put into place. On receiving the message, the men simply finished their hole

and headed for the club house, where they knew transportation would be available to take them to CDI headquarters.

The CDI communications center also got the alert and already had redundant communications links between President Roth's office, the CDI itself and the Embassy of the Republic of Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic. From the embassy to the presidential palace there were lines to different spots in Santo Domingo but the Puerto Rican mission could not vouch for their security.

Once the circuits were in place, the CDI watch officer called the White House using the same embedded-chip card method. The Chief of Staff walked back to President Roth's office and nodded at him.

President Roth grabbed the phone and counted the rings. On the third ring somebody answered:

"President Roth, President Rosado will speak with you in a second."

"Thank You."

15 seconds later, Roth heard another click.

"President Roth, what a pleasure!" Greeted the President of the Dominican Republic.

"President Rosado, it is time."

Rosado was speechless. After what seemed like an eternity, he replied:

"Are you sure? Isn't this a bit too rushed?"

"No. It is either now or never. And you lose more than I do."

"You are right. Let's do this then. I guess your people will be talking to my people, right?"

"Yes, they are waiting for my signal."

"Well, then tell them the people of the Dominican Republic once again welcomes their Puerto Rican brothers with open arms."

"Thank you Mister President, you did the right thing."

"I really hope so, I don't want to end up a foot note in some gringo history book."

The men talked a little about their families and other things and then hung up on a friendly note. Minutes after the call was completed, an advance party of politicians, soldiers and scientists took off from airports in San Juan and Aguadilla. Their final destination: the Dominican Republic. Similar delegations were dispatched from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico, but these would have to wait since Puerto Rican aircraft dispatched for this purpose would transport them.

The NSA watch center in Fort Meade, Maryland took notice of the increased tempo of the communications between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. While the NSA was by nature cocky about their ability to intercept communications traffic, they were well aware of the Puerto Ricans new encryption capabilities and how hard it was to penetrate them. The problem here was that all the communications were in the clear.

"It is like they want us to know," said the NSA shift supervisor. He passed the report upstairs and went back to his crossword puzzle.

The reports took almost a day to crawl through the bureaucracies of the National Security Agency, the National Reconnaissance Office and the Central Intelligence Agency. By the time everything landed on the desk of a carded National Intelligence Officer (who would then brief the National Security Advisor) it did not take a genius to figure out what was going on.

The NIO requested a meeting with the National Security Advisor and did not even bother with preparing a briefing. The NIO rated a driver, and he could square off his paperwork on the drive from North Virginia to the White House.

Almost 36 hours after the phone call between the Presidents of the Republic of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, a NIO told the National Security Advisor to the President of the United States that Puerto Rico had just settled the terms for an *anschluss* between Puerto Rico and the Dominicans.

The National Security Advisor had no choice but to call up the Secretary of State to give him the bad news: a new super power was born, and there was nothing they could do to stop them. The National Security Advisor did not hesitate to predict that within 10 years, the Republic of Puerto Rico would span across the Caribbean Sea and probably into Central and South America.

** The End **

A word from the author

This book was written in two Apple Powerbook laptops and Microsoft Word. I also used a neat little program called OmniOutline for jotting down notes and outlines, but most of the writing was done in Word.

I would appreciate your comments, thoughts and hate mail. Just drop me a word at pedro@veraperez.com, or you can also visit my web page at <http://veraperez.com>. On any given day I post new content to my web site at least a half dozen times and I always love to receive feedback from my readers.

If you are interested in a print copy of this book, please email me and I will be more than happy to let you know once the book is available in print.

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Pedro Alberto Vera

July 3, 2004

Reston, Virginia

SHINING STAR

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